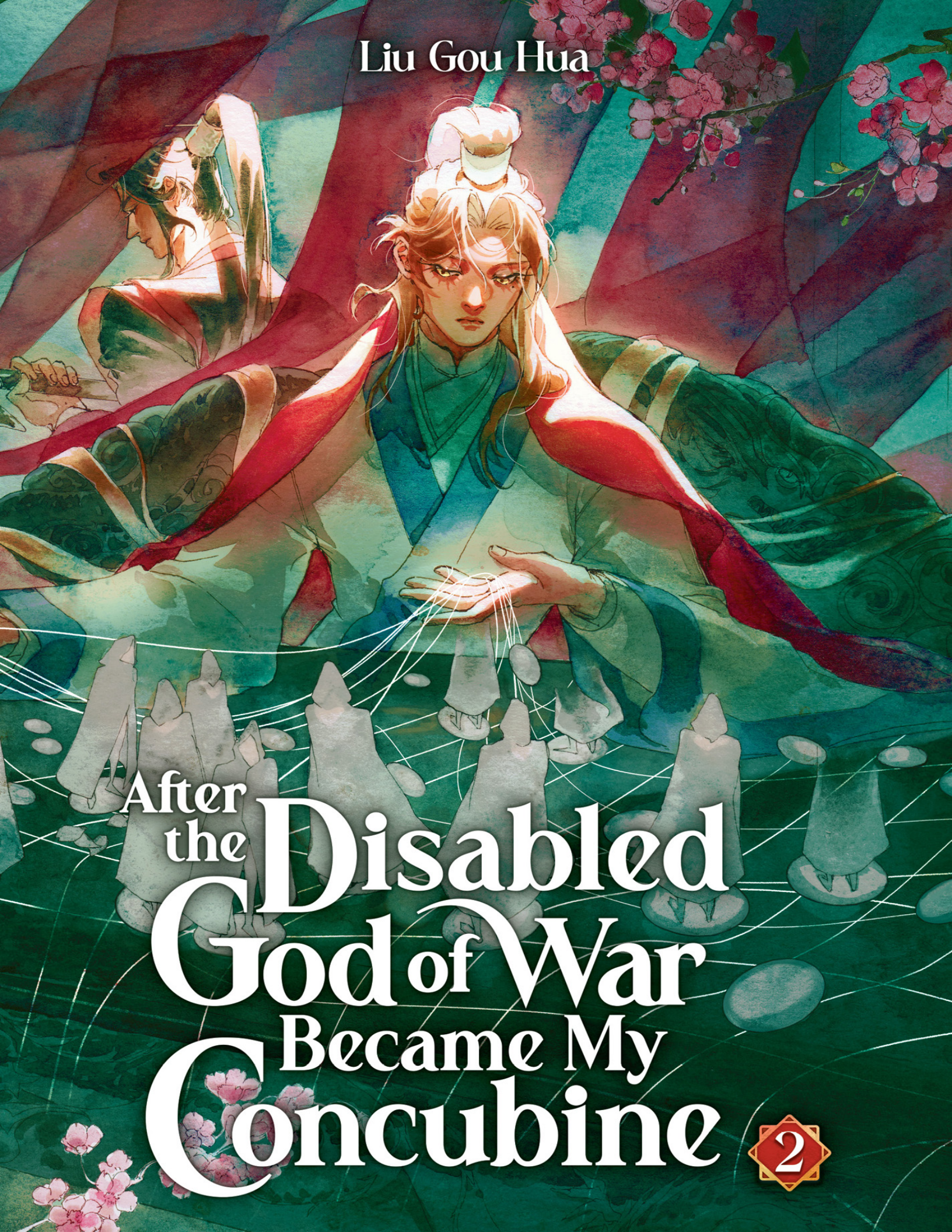
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After the Disabled God of War Became My Concubine
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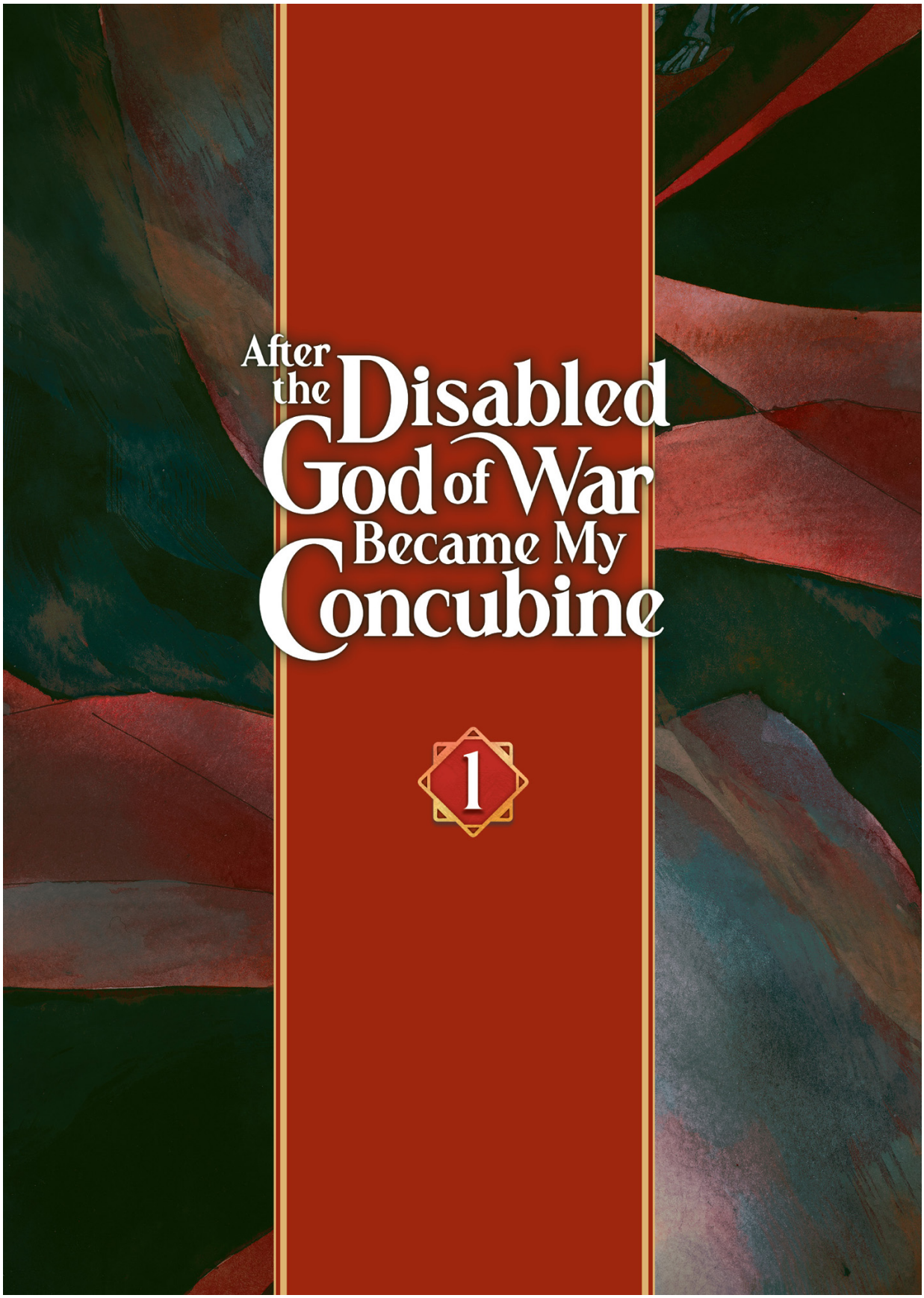
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WRITTEN BY
Liu Gou Hua

COVER BY
Fish (@mofumofish)

INTERIOR ILLUSTRATIONS BY
SeokSu

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TRANSLATION: Faelicy, Z. Yan
ADAPTATION: Lumi K. Verity
LOGO DESIGN: Ryan Lewis
COVER DESIGN: M. A. Lewife
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
INTERIOR LAYOUT: Tanya Sokolovskaya
COPY EDITOR: Jack Hamm
PROOFREADER: Ami Leh, Winter Greene
EDITOR: Jasmine Thone
QUALITY CONTROL: Meg van Huygen
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: April Malig, Jules Valera
PREPRESS MANAGER: Rafer Roberts
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
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PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

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Chapter 35

THE EMPEROR HAD BEEN in a very good mood for the last few days, indeed.

Despite the inspections turning the entire Ministry of Rites upside down and sending the court into turmoil, he remained in high spirits. His uncle handled these trivial matters for him, after all. No matter how many quakes they caused, the emperor wouldn't feel the tremors.

And although he didn't care which officials from the Ministry of Rites had been arrested, he knew that *someone* needed to be punished. His uncle, Pang Shao, had impressed upon him that the embezzlement of funds for the birthday banquet was a grave and personal insult.

Still, the emperor wasn't particularly concerned about the severity of the punishment. What *was* important to him was the compensation he'd received from his uncle—two Yangzhou Companions, whom he'd secretly procured, disguised as daughters of noble families, and slipped into the emperor's harem.

These women, who'd been trained and raised in pleasure houses, carried a charm that proper ladies lacked. After spending the past few days intoxicated within their tender embrace, he decided that his uncle surely knew what was best. If Pang Shao insisted the offense deserved harsh punishment, then so be it.

Then, not two days later, even better news reached the emperor's ears. It seemed his fifth brother, that sickly wretch, had suddenly developed a high fever and was now bedridden.

Hearing this, the emperor excitedly leaped from his den of pleasure to immediately dispatch imperial physicians, eager to see if this episode would be what finally claimed his brother's life.

Upon their return, they reported an odd development.

"His Highness the Prince of Jing does not have a fever," one physician said.

At the time, the emperor was playing madiao[1] with Pang Shao by his side. When they heard this, both their expressions darkened.

"What's wrong with him, then?" Pang Shao asked gravely as he set down his cards.

"Although he has no fever, he is bedridden. After taking his pulse, I concluded it is due to shock, unrest, excessive drinking, and exposure to cold, which have weakened his constitution."

Pang Shao fell into thought at these words.

"Then why did he report to me that he had a fever?" asked the emperor with obvious discontent. "Even in such a state, he still finds time to lie to me! How audacious…"

Pang Shao raised a hand. "Your Majesty."

"Uncle?" The emperor turned to him.

Pang Shao's pensive face gradually broke into a faint smile.

"If I am not mistaken…the implied circumstances here may bring Your Majesty even greater joy," he said.

"Why?" The emperor looked puzzled.

"Your Majesty, do you recall Ji You?"

The emperor thought for a long moment before finally just barely recalling the name. “Ah, that official who embezzled my silver?”

Pang Shao nodded with a smile.

“On the morning of his arrest, the Prince of Jing rushed to the Ministry of Justice’s prison and met with him privately,” Pang Shao said.

The emperor frowned. “And then?”

Pang Shao’s smile sharpened.

“Then, the Prince of Jing went out alone in the rain to drink heavily,” Pang Shao explained. “Within two days, he fell ill. Your Majesty, what do you suppose this ‘shock and unrest’ of his stems from?”

The emperor pondered this, and then his face slowly lit up with delight.

“You mean…he must also be involved in the embezzlement and is afraid it’ll be traced back to him?”

“This is merely my speculation, of course,” Pang Shao added quickly, though he still gave an emphatic nod.

A gleam of excitement shone in the emperor’s eyes.

“Then send someone to investigate immediately!” he declared. “As a subject, he dares to scheme against me? Tell me, isn’t this deceiving the emperor? Isn’t this tantamount to rebellion?!”

The more he spoke, the more exuberant he became, as if he’d convinced himself he could execute Jiang Suizhou on the spot. He slammed his cards onto the daybed in exhilaration and turned to Pang Shao to make a request.

“Uncle, let me handle this investigation personally. What do you say?”

Pang Shao looked at him.

No one understood better than he how much his emperor despised that fifth brother of his.

The previous emperor had few heirs, and several of the princes died young, one after another. Only the fifth prince, born to the favored consort and raised under the late emperor’s personal care, had survived unscathed.

Though the current emperor was the legitimate heir, in his younger days he often felt invisible to his father, who never spared him a glance. The always-opportunistic palace staff subjected him to countless humiliations due to that fifth brother of his. Pang Shao knew better than anyone how deeply his emperor hated him.

Thus, to please the emperor, he could neve***r go wrong targeting the Prince of Jing.

However, the Prince of Jing was still of imperial blood. While they could torment and humiliate him, outright killing him was no easy feat. Even if the embezzlement could be directly linked to him, and even if his guilt were undeniable, it wouldn’t warrant so severe a punishment.

In that case, why not step back and let the emperor enjoy toying with him as if he were watching a cricket fight?[2]

“His Highness the Prince of Jing is of noble status. I dare not overstep,” he said, a faint smile at the edges of his lips. “If Your Majesty wishes to investigate, I will immediately allocate personnel for your command.”

***

Once the rains began in Jiangnan, they seemed endless.

The light drizzle started on the day the prince fell ill after visiting Madam Gu’s courtyard, and it continued for several more days without clearing. In that time, the atmosphere in Anyin Hall grew heavy and stifling.

The most direct victim was Meng Qianshan.

The last time he had felt such oppressive tension was when the prince spent the night at Madam Xu’s quarters. This time, though, it seemed far worse. Though he couldn’t quite pinpoint the exact reason, Meng Qianshan felt uneasy all day.

He thought it would improve after the prince’s return.

However, after staying one day at Madam Gu’s, the prince stayed a second.

This had never happened before.

Surely, by the third day, the prince would return?

But on the evening of the third day, Anyin Hall received word that the prince had fallen ill.

Meng Qianshan rushed anxiously to Gu Changyun’s courtyard, only to be turned away by Gu Changyun himself, on behalf of the prince.

Wrapped in a striking red robe and leaning casually against the doorframe, Madam Gu looked enchanting as ever. He watched with a faint smile as Meng Qianshan fretted outside, then called out to ease the eunuch’s mind.

“Why all the upset? His Highness merely overindulged in wine and exhausted himself,” he said. “Just report to the palace and the Ministry of Rites to request that they grant him leave. As for the rest… Take good care of that Madam Huo in his stead.”

“But…” Meng Qianshan craned his neck to peer inside.

Gu Changyun raised a hand, blocking his view.

“His Highness’s orders—you’re not to enter,” he said. “Ah, has it been raining these days? His Highness said to return quickly and light the underfloor heating in Anyin Hall. Make sure not to neglect the cripple.”

With a haughty glance, Gu Changyun turned and closed the door.

Inside, Jiang Suizhou lay in bed. His breathing was uneven, his face pale.

“Everything’s arranged?” he asked.

Gu Changyun came to his side and nodded.

Jiang Suizhou let his eyes close.

It was better to keep Meng Qianshan away, simply to avoid a barrage of unnecessary questions.

He had planned to return to Anyin Hall after the first few days, but the drug’s effects had hit much harder and faster than he’d expected. It was so sudden and violent that it left him too weak to stand, let alone return to his own quarters.

“Your Highness, rest assured,” Gu Changyun said comfortingly. “After the first few days, the drug’s effects will mellow. The symptoms will then appear as nothing more than a weakened constitution due to palpitations.”

Jiang Suizhou nodded.

“By tomorrow, the palace will have received the news and will likely send someone,” he said.

“Indeed. Once the imperial physician examines you and administers treatment, it will naturally prove ineffective,” Gu Changyun said. “Then, we’ll have grounds to post notices seeking outside physicians.”

Jiang Suizhou nodded again and closed his eyes.

Seeing he needed rest, Gu Changyun tactfully withdrew to the outer room.

Meanwhile, although the underfloor heating in Anyin Hall was being frantically lit, the atmosphere remained icy.

Servants worked to light the heating that night and drive out the dampness, while Meng Qianshan attended cautiously to Huo Wujiu. He stood hunched beside the madam, not daring to utter a word.

Huo Wujiu held a book, but he hadn’t actually turned a page in some time.

“Speak if you have something to say,” he said coldly.

“Madam Gu’s courtyard says that…His Highness is too weak to stand up and will need to rest there,” the eunuch whispered.

For a long moment, Huo Wujiu didn’t move.

“What illness?” he asked tonelessly.

Meng Qianshan hesitated.

When no answer was forthcoming, Huo Wujiu lifted his gaze and fixed his dark, piercing eyes on Meng Qianshan.

“Speak,” he ordered.

Meng Qianshan shivered under the intensity of his gaze. He felt beads of cold sweat break out across his back, and he stumbled over his words as he hurriedly said, “They say His Highness dr-drank heavily these past days and…ah, overexerted himself…so he fell ill…”

Huo Wujiu remained motionless, but his grip on the book tightened, crumpling the pages.

Drank heavily? Overexerted himself?

An indescribable irritation swiftly rose in him.

Splendid…just splendid. Not only had that sickly prince gone out drinking in the rain, apparently he’d felt the need to continue drinking in his concubine’s quarters and fooling around until he “overexerted” himself.

Huo Wujiu had never known someone so infuriating.

The Prince of Jing was unlike Jiang Shunheng or Pang Shao, who were rotten to the core; Huo Wujiu could face them calmly and impassively. The prince, on the other hand, was like a cat determined to prance all over his chest to demand his attention, only to provoke him with all kinds of nonsense.

Huo Wujiu would have considered these antics trivial and dismissible, but coming from Jiang Suizhou, they were indescribably frustrating. The prince’s actions relentlessly teased at Huo Wujiu’s limits, and now any fleeting infraction flooded him with irritation.

Beside him, Meng Qianshan watched as Huo Wujiu dug his fingers into the pages of the book he clutched. He couldn’t help feeling as if those fingers were tightening around his throat, cutting off his breath.

Even someone as slow on the uptake as Meng Qianshan could easily grasp the madam’s thoughts by now. It was obvious that the man was

silently furious—or more specifically, jealous.

"Madam Huo…?" he ventured timidly after a moment.

Huo Wujiu paused, then tossed the crumpled book aside.

"You can leave," he said.

"Are you all right, Madam?" Meng Qianshan whispered worriedly. "Please don't fret. His Highness has always been frail, as you know. Catching a bit of a cold after drinking is not uncommon either…"

Huo Wujiu snorted and looked up at Meng Qianshan, eyes cold.

"I'm fine," he said. "I just hadn't realized the rules in the Prince of Jing's household were so lax."

Puzzled, Meng Qianshan waited for him to elaborate.

"In the household of the Marquis of Dingbei," Huo Wujiu said slowly, "a concubine who bewitched their master like this would long ago have been executed."

He gazed expressionlessly out the window as he spoke, and his voice was icy, as if forced through clenched teeth.

Chapter 36

As the third month began, the weather grew warmer and the rains lessened.

The underfloor heating in Anyin Hall burned cautiously for two days. The dampness was finally dispelled, yet a chill lingered in the air, stubborn and unyielding.

The servants attributed it to the prince's absence, whispering that the room felt emptier without him. Only Meng Qianshan knew that this was not the entire reason for the pervasive cold. It wasn't just that the prince was gone, it was that he had left someone behind.

A certain someone who, despite continuing his routine undisturbed, exuded an aura so forbidding it kept all at bay.

For this reason, Meng Qianshan spent each day of Jiang Suizhou's absence on constant alert, walking on eggshells around the madam to avoid provoking his wrath through some misstep.

This tense state of affairs lasted until the day Huo Wujiu was to leave the estate to attend the Chen household's flower-viewing party.

Though Jiang Suizhou had initially declined on Huo Wujiu's behalf, the imperial decree during the emperor's birthday banquet had forced a renewal of the invitation.

Meng Qianshan didn't dare forget, and he was fully prepared to help Huo Wujiu get washed and changed that morning. But of course, Huo Wujiu refused his help entirely. All the eunuch could do was lay out the robes and accessories and wait for him to dress himself.

At the appointed hour, a carriage departed the Prince of Jing's residence for Chen Ti's estate.

These social gatherings among the wives of court officials, especially those in the same ministry, were common throughout every dynasty. However, the one occurring at Chen Ti's home that day was unlike any other.

After all, among the capital's upper echelons, the Prince of Jing's particular *inclinations* were widely known. Everyone knew the prince's concubine was in fact a man. Gender segregation was still maintained in many facets of the Jing dynasty, so who would dare invite a man to a gathering of wives for tea and pastries?

Only a seasoned sycophant like Chen Ti would stoop to such impropriety, in a desperate bid to please Pang Shao.

And his wife, naturally, followed his lead.

Early that morning, Lady Chen Li stood at the estate gates, her heart uneasy.

Her husband had briefed her days ago. She knew that the Prince of Jing's male concubine hadn't been invited to socialize, but rather to engineer a scandal surrounding him—ideally one that reached the emperor's ears.

As a sheltered noblewoman who had scarcely interacted with men before marriage, Lady Chen Li was at a loss. How could she make a man disgrace himself in her home?

And besides, what possible scandal could she allow a man to cause for the other guests? These women were all the wives of officials, and the idea of damaging their reputations was unthinkable.

Frustrated by her timidity, Chen Ti scolded her harshly and ordered his concubine, Qin Liu, to co-host the event.

Thus, to Lady Chen Li's relief, the task of handling the Prince of Jing's household fell to Qin Liu.

As dawn broke, the two women waited at the gates until the carriages began arriving one after another. Qin Liu welcomed each guest inside while Lady Chen Li lingered at the entrance with her maids.

Eventually, a particular carriage rounded the street corner and came to a halt before Chen Ti's estate. Its markings indicated that it belonged to a prince.

Lady Chen Li composed herself, plastered on a smile, and stepped forward.

A young eunuch hopped down from the carriage and directed the coachman and attendants to assist in retrieving its occupant. Shortly thereafter, they wheeled out the guest whom Lady Chen Li had so anxiously awaited.

Even seated in the wheelchair, the man was tall, imposing, and surprisingly handsome, though he kept his eyes lowered and his expression cold. His features were striking and masculine, with a bladelike scar cutting across one sharp, bold brow. Lady Chen Li found herself thinking it was as though one of the dashing generals from the romance novels she read in her youth had stepped out from the pages.

She didn't dare allow herself more than a fleeting glance, and so she hastily averted her gaze as she stepped forward to greet him.

"Madam Huo, you've arrived," she said. "The other ladies are already here. Please follow me inside."

The man in the wheelchair didn’t even deign to look up at her, let alone respond. Fortunately, the eunuch behind him swiftly intervened.

“Thank you, Lady Chen,” he said cheerfully.

Lady Chen Li nodded and led the way, supported by her maid.

***

Chen Ti’s garden was a modest space filled with oft-seen flowers and potted plants from Lin’an arranged in lively clusters, though the lotuses adorning the small pond had yet to bloom.

The ladies of the capital, adorned in all manner of colorful silks and scents that threatened to outshine the blossoms themselves, were well-acquainted, and the garden was already abuzz with guests chatting amiably.

The faint creaking of a wheelchair brought every conversation to an abrupt halt.

In an instant, dozens of eyes flicked to Huo Wujiu and then almost immediately away again, dismissing that he was ever there.

The ladies understood the situation.

Chen Ti’s machinations were obvious. Inviting the Prince of Jing’s male concubine—a prisoner of war who’d led the Northern Liang armies to slaughter thousands—to a ladies’ garden party was intended only to curry favor with the emperor.

At the emperor’s birthday banquet, men and women had been seated separately, so none of the wives present had seen Huo Wujiu before. Based

on his infamous reputation, they had expected a brute like Qin Shubao, the deified Tang dynasty general whose stern face often guarded entranceways.

Confronted with Huo Wujiu's appearance, several of the closer wives exchanged discreet glances among themselves—the general was surprisingly handsome. Yet no one dared to let their gaze linger too long. Lord Chen's motives were clearly malicious, and they wanted no part in whatever scheme was afoot, lest they end up stained as well.

And so, just about everyone behaved as if Huo Wujiu simply weren't there at all.

"Such a man," one young woman whispered, tugging at her friend's sleeve. "Truly, heaven envies the gifted and torments them so."

Her friend hushed her quickly as Qin Liu came to usher them to their seats, seeing that all the guests had arrived.

Despite having thrived in Chen Ti's household for a few years now by exploiting her timid mistress, Qin Liu had received few chances to prove her worth in the public eye. This party was just as much an opportunity Lord Chen had created for himself as it was her chance to shine. If she played her cards right today, she could help Lord Chen accomplish this task and prove herself the true mistress of the household.

Lady Chen Li, nervous and out of her depth, was no match for Qin Liu's social agility. Soon, Qin Liu had all the ladies seated and served with tea and snacks.

Then, swaying gracefully, she approached Huo Wujiu.

"Greetings, Madam Huo," she said with a curtsy.

She had already scrutinized the handsome man in the wheelchair and devised her plan. Though he'd once been a noble, famed warrior, now he

was simply another prisoner of war—thoroughly disgraced, disabled, humiliated.

If she wanted to climb higher, she had no choice but to use him as a rung in her ladder today.

With a flippant mental apology, Qin Liu smiled and addressed him once more.

“We’ve all heard of Madam Huo’s talents, but seeing you in person surpasses all tales. Though we’re like sisters today, propriety demands distance. I’ve arranged a seat farther away—I hope you don’t mind.”

Huo Wujiu ignored her.

The eunuch behind him smiled. “Thank you, Madam.”

Qin Liu waved off the reaction and led them to a table by the pond.

Not a second later, a maid approached with tea. Just as she’d planned, Qin Liu slipped the teapot out of the maid’s hands and stepped over to Huo Wujiu. Standing at his side, she poured his tea with the utmost grace.

Huo Wujiu’s brow furrowed slightly, unnoticed by Qin Liu.

Then, with a practiced cry of alarm, she “accidentally” spilled the tea and drew the attention of every guest in the vicinity. Once those eyes were on her, she fell toward Huo Wujiu in such a way that it looked for all the world like he’d just attempted to inappropriately grab her.

Or rather, it would have, if only Huo Wujiu hadn’t neatly evaded her.

With a slight turn of his wheelchair, Huo Wujiu slipped her ministrations, frowning deeply. It exposed for all that her dramatic, showy movements had been a deliberate lunge.

The crowd gasped.

Thrown off-balance as she was, Qin Liu's momentum pitched her forward, and she careened straight into the pond.

***

Chaos erupted.

Guests screamed, and a few maids leaped into the water to rescue her. Only Huo Wujiu remained entirely composed as he pulled his wheelchair back a little to watch the scene with an icy expression.

A cheap trick. He had seen through her the moment she leaned in.

Beside him, Meng Qianshan stood frozen, dumbfounded.

Soon, Qin Liu was fished out and bundled in robes and blankets. Lady Chen Li hurried forward with the intention of sending her off to rest, but Qin Liu stubbornly refused to yield.

She couldn't turn back now. Her misstep had already cost her dearly, and she refused to leave empty-handed after this.

All eyes were on her.

"How could Madam Huo do this?" she sobbed. "Not only did he try to touch me, he pushed me into the pond!"

No one spoke up to refute her, despite knowing the truth. Seeing this as success, Qin Liu doubled down.

"My virtue is ruined! I can no longer face my lord! Let me go, let me die here so I can cleanse my shame!"

Lady Chen Li stood trembling, Qin Liu's scheme clear to her. With such a commotion, the scandal would spread quickly. Then, tomorrow, her

husband would use this incident as a pretext to speak to the emperor.

As much as she wanted to stop it, she was still Chen Ti's wife, and it was her duty to obey him.

She glanced gingerly at Huo Wujiu.

Absorbing Qin Liu's theatrics with a cold gaze, he sat expressionless and straight-backed, like an unbreakable spear.

Lady Chen Li had never met a military man, but somehow, this was precisely how she imagined a true general—indomitable, unyielding.

But heaven had cursed him, leaving him in this predicament. No one would help him now.

"Mistress! Mistress!" called a gatekeeper as he rushed into the garden.

Pale and frantic, he halted at the garden's edge.

"What as it?" Lady Chen Li asked, turning to face him.

"The Prince of Jing has arrived!"

Chapter 37

A HUSH DESCENDED across the garden. Only Qin Liu's faint sobs wavered into the air, but even those were muffled with fear.

Lady Chen Li froze, then forced a smile.

"The Prince of Jing is here?" she asked. "But His Highness never informed us, and the garden is full of ladies. We haven't prepared—"

"His Highness s-says that, ah, he says—"

"No need for preparations."

This cool, clear voice cut in from behind the stammering gatekeeper.

All gazes were drawn to the speaker. A young man wearing a jade crown slowly made his way into the garden, supported by a servant.

Despite the blooming spring, he wore a snow-white cloak lined with fur, its wide sleeves fluttering like clouds. His delicate face was beautiful to the point of disbelief, and his aloof attitude and arrogant expression gave him an alluring yet untouchable air.

He almost looked like some sort of deity, like a white fox that had achieved divinity and now descended upon the garden from the heavens.

It was, of course, Jiang Suizhou.

After a stunned pause, the ladies hurriedly rose and bowed in greeting.

Seeing the garden full of beautiful women bowing, he briefly swept his gaze over the crowd and then gestured for them to rise. As he did so, his eyes locked onto Qin Liu.

Just as he'd thought.

He knew that Chen Ti must have had some sort of scheme in mind when he invited Huo Wujiu, but Jiang Suizhou hadn't expected him to go to such lengths. Apparently Chen Ti was even willing to sacrifice his own concubine's dignity just to humiliate Huo Wujiu.

He glanced furtively at Huo Wujiu, who didn't look up or acknowledge his arrival in any way, as expected.

At least the sobbing woman was seated far away from him; it seemed she'd failed in her attempt to frame him. The situation wasn't too dire.

Assessing the scene, Jiang Suizhou approached Lady Chen Li and stopped a deliberate three paces away.

"My unannounced visit has disturbed you, Lady Chen," he said mildly.

Lady Chen Li hastily bowed. "Your Highness honors us! Your presence alone brings glory to our humble home—"

Jiang Suizhou surveyed the Chen household's garden with a faint smile.

Their home was rather modest; a far cry from the lavish estates Chen Ti had bought with embezzled funds to house his mistress.

"Humble, indeed," he echoed, a hint of mockery in his tone.

For some reason, Lady Chen Li's heart raced.

"No need for flattery," he continued, still smiling. "I simply distrust a certain…*someone* from my household, so I came to see if he's making trouble for you all again."

As he spoke, his gaze wandered over the entire garden before finally coming to a stop on Qin Liu.

“It seems my timing was fortuitous.”

His tone was light, almost pleasant, yet everyone found their hearts suspended in their throats. No one dared to make a sound.

Qin Liu shivered in her still-damp robes and peeked up at him.

She watched as His Highness the Prince of Jing, beautiful beyond mortal description, gave Huo Wujiu a cold look and walked straight ahead. The young eunuch behind Huo Wujiu seemed to immediately understand the implied command as he hurried forward to fetch him a wooden armchair.

His Highness slowly settled into his seat, his cloak billowing and pooling around him. His air was dignified and graceful, his eyes cold and imperious.

He leaned back in his chair, his gaze now fully fixed upon Qin Liu.

The prince’s gaze pressed down on her as though he were a god surveying mere mortals, yet even now, he exuded a magnetism that drew people to him like moths to a flame.

As Qin Liu stared back at him, her shaky breathing stuttered to a stop entirely.

At the same time, he opened his mouth to speak.

“Go on, then,” he said. “Explain what happened.”

Qin Liu jolted back to reality and quickly looked around her. To her surprise, Madam Huo—who’d completely ignored her since his arrival in

the garden—had turned to look at her sometime during the few minutes she'd been staring blankly at the Prince of Jing.

Madam Huo's eyes were hard, and his brow was creased in a frown as he looked down at her, as if examining something dirty.

Qin Liu drew a deep breath and forced herself to calm down.

With the Prince of Jing here, the situation was about to change. Whether things escalated or defused depended on his stance.

Given his notorious hatred for Huo Wujiu, she decided to give a little push to tip the scales.

Gulping, she summoned her courage and broke free of her two maids, then walked forward and knelt before Jiang Suizhou.

“Your Highness,” she cried, her eyes brimming with tears and voice trembling. “This concerns my honor as a woman, and although it happened in public, I am too ashamed to speak of it!”

Pathetically, she raised her sleeve to wipe her tears before continuing.

“It would be better to let me die and at least be free of disgrace!” she wailed.

By presenting herself as vulnerable and playing the victim, she would evoke his sympathy. As a man, he would be naturally biased in her favor, and that would in turn be magnified by pity for her in her sorry state. He’d believe anything she said.

Men were terribly susceptible to this kind of tactic.

As she dabbed at her tears, Qin Liu stole a look at Jiang Suizhou, only to find him entirely unmoved. Silently, he extended a slender, ghost-white hand from beneath his cloak to take a cup of warm tea from his nearby eunuch. He took a slow, deliberate sip.

“Fine, don’t explain anything,” he said flatly.

Qin Liu froze. How could she have forgotten to take into account that the man before her was, in fact, biased toward *men* in this way instead? She might as well have been putting on a play for the blind.

The Prince of Jing set down his tea, raised his hand, and casually pointed to someone in the crowd.

“I’ll have this lady explain to me instead.”

Qin Liu quickly turned her head and saw that he was pointing to a woman who’d recently married the son of the Duke of Anguo.

She’d briefly met and exchanged a few words with that woman earlier. It was obvious she was a pampered young lady from a powerful family. Her husband’s family spoiled her as well. She’d never known hardship, and her thoughts were as pure as a fresh sheet of paper.

Sure enough, when the Prince of Jing called upon her, the young woman seemed rather stunned and unsure of herself. She helplessly glanced back and forth between the Prince of Jing and Qin Liu.

“Just now…” she began hesitantly.

The Prince of Jing gave her a mild smile.

“You need only tell the truth,” he said.

The nervous wife paused for a moment.

“It wasn’t much,” she said softly. “Consort Qin stumbled and fell toward Madam Huo. But he moved out of the way, so Consort Qin fell headfirst into the lake…”

“Is that so?”

The surrounding ladies exchanged glances. Not a single objection was voiced.

An icy wave of horror washed over Qin Liu, chilling her to the bone. She watched the Prince of Jing smile slightly and nod at the lady who’d explained the situation. Then he turned to look back at Qin Liu again.

Flickering within those captivating, fox-like eyes was a hint of satisfied amusement.

Only now did things begin to click into place for her.

The Prince of Jing had rolled in like thunder, ready to castigate someone for their insolence…but despite all appearances, that someone wasn't Huo Wujiu; it was Qin Liu.

He'd come to help him, not her.

She finally understood this, and yet everything had unfolded so smoothly that she was left with no grounds to protest.

***

On the ride back to the residence, only the clatter of carriage wheels peppered the silence.

Jiang Suizhou leaned against the carriage wall, his breathing still a bit uneven.

In truth, this was the first day he'd managed to get out of bed—and only just barely. Additionally, the Chen estate was small and lacked even a palanquin, so he'd had to walk all the way to the garden, which was quite taxing on him.

Fortunately, it was worth it. They'd pulled off a flawless conclusion.

After Jiang Suizhou denied the malicious woman a chance to speak, he deliberately pointed to a girl he'd already noticed. She was adorned in splendid robes and let her every emotion play across her face. In other words, she was clearly a naive young lady from a powerful family and incapable of lying.

Sure enough, she'd exposed the concubine's deception. This also gave Chen Ti's main wife the justification to deal with her right away.

The concubine wouldn't pay with her life, but her reputation would be destroyed, and through no one's fault but her own.

Plus, this farce had given Jiang Suizhou an excuse to whisk Huo Wujiu away early, sparing him from hours spent enduring the cloying scent of makeup and perfume.

All in all, Jiang Suizhou was in a good mood.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

His relationship with Huo Wujiu was less tense nowadays, and he spoke to him much more casually. So long as he started talking, he figured a response from Huo Wujiu would naturally follow.

But all he received was silence.

The carriage was quiet. Beside him, Huo Wujiu behaved as if he hadn't heard him at all.

Huh? Is something wrong? Jiang Suizhou looked at him in confusion.

Huo Wujiu kept his posture immaculate as he sat straight and tall in his wheelchair. Then he turned his head and met Jiang Suizhou's gaze with dark, piercing eyes.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

Not having expected Huo Wujiu to parry his question with another in return, Jiang Suizhou was left flummoxed.

"What?"

Without warning, Huo Wujiu's hand shot out toward Jiang Suizhou's forehead. He reflexively tried to dodge, but the carriage was cramped, and

he lacked Huo Wujiu's agility.

Jiang Suizhou quickly found himself restrained, forced to allow that calloused hand to unceremoniously press against his forehead, ruffling his bangs in the process.

After a moment, Huo Wujiu withdrew his hand.

"What are you doing?" Jiang Suizhou asked, his breathing uneven as he scrambled to sit up properly again.

Huo Wujiu shifted his gaze to look ahead, his expression cold and unwavering.

"Quite a bit better," he remarked.

"I don't have a fever," Jiang Suizhou retorted, suddenly finding the whole situation rather comical. "What's the point of feeling my forehead?"

Huo Wujiu gave him a dubious look.

Jiang Suizhou was currently so weak that it took all of his concentration to simply remain upright in the moving carriage. He was completely oblivious to just how wretched he looked, but his pallid complexion, ragged breathing, and messy hair were all clear as day to Huo Wujiu.

Huo Wujiu hesitated for a moment, parted his lips, and finally, his voice came.

"Well, since you can move around now, you should come back to live in your own courtyard," he said in an icy tone.

"What?" Jiang Suizhou said, momentarily stunned.

While it was true that Huo Wujiu wasn't a normal concubine, but actually a prisoner of war being kept in his residence, this behavior was out

of line. How could he be so bold as to matter-of-factly tell him where he should live?

“If you were to overexert yourself and die in that concubine’s quarters, I’d end up being thrown back into prison,” Huo Wujiu said nonchalantly.

That slap in the face finally snapped Jiang Suizhou out of his shocked stupor, but Huo Wujiu simply turned his head away and ignored him once more.

Jiang Suizhou glared at the back of his head with palpable resentment.

Unbelievable! This man actually dared to curse him with death, and so openly!

Though Huo Wujiu rarely spoke, when he did, his words were enough to drive one insane with rage.

I plan to live a long life, thank you very much! As long as you don’t chop my head off, at least!

Fuming, he straightened his back as he turned to stare out the window.

In ignoring Huo Wujiu, he didn’t notice that the other man’s hands were clenched tightly into fists atop his knees.

It was the desperate resistance of a man overwhelmed by surging jealousy.

Even Huo Wujiu himself couldn’t believe it, but all it took was a single glance at Jiang Suizhou in this disheveled, weakened state to unravel him. The sight of him made his eyes burn and filled him with such irritation

that he yearned to drive a spear through the chest of whoever else had seen Jiang Suizhou like this.

It was as if a vicious dragon had awakened in his chest.

A greedy, irascible dragon whose eyes remained fixed on a certain treasure.

Chapter 38

As baffling as Huo Wujiu's behavior was, Jiang Suizhou did end up returning to Anyin Hall that day.

He'd never intended to stay long at Gu Changyun's courtyard, anyway. His prolonged visit had only been due to his inability to stand up, so now that he had recovered somewhat, it was only natural to reside once again in his own quarters.

Even if it meant being exposed to Huo Wujiu's sour expression.

He had no idea what he'd done to provoke Huo Wujiu, but given the man's notoriously unpredictable temper, he didn't bother dwelling on it.

In any case, Anyin Hall regained its normalcy as he and Huo Wujiu settled back into their usual routines. Generally, they each kept to their own space without disturbing the other.

Jiang Suizhou was also a bit preoccupied with quietly awaiting the results of the plans he and his two advisors had set in motion.

Sure enough, the palace sent imperial physicians to examine him as soon as he fell ill. Also as expected, they were unable to pinpoint the cause and could only attribute his condition to frailty and shock.

Days of bitter medicine had done nothing to improve his health, and as the treatments proved futile, the physicians' reports to the palace gradually shifted in tone.

They informed the emperor that the Prince of Jing's illness had left him in declining health, and he was now confined to bed rest. Perhaps the

sudden onset of the illness had damaged his constitution, worsening his already fragile state.

For the emperor, this news was more joyous than the New Year.

Naturally, happiness shared was happiness doubled. For this reason, he immediately ordered the physicians to cease treatment, but not before arranging one final visit to have it slip to the prince himself that his feeble body might not have much time left.

The physician they sent that morning complied with this request, and so he wore an expression of mock gravity as he took Jiang Suizhou's pulse.

"What is it?" Jiang Suizhou asked flatly.

He saw through the act at once. He leaned against the headboard and watched as the physician sighed, hesitated, then sighed once more for good measure before kneeling before Jiang Suizhou.

"Though I am loath to say it…" he murmured. "Perhaps it would be best to stop Your Highness's medical treatments."

As expected, this properly trained physician was no match for Gu Changyun's unconventional methods. Clearly, the man had realized he couldn't cure him and reported as much to the emperor, who then ordered an end to his treatment.

Now Jiang Suizhou had the necessary pretense to begin seeking outside physicians.

He would post notices, of course, but he also planned to make use of the elite guards Xu Du had trained for him. Disguised as servants, they could be dispatched to remote areas in search of doctors.

As pleased as he was with this development, he feigned irritation.

“Why stop them?” he asked, frowning.

The physician glanced at him cautiously.

“The truth is…w-well,” he stammered, searching for the right phrasing.

Jiang Suizhou scowled. “I have no patience for nonsense.”

The physician cursed inwardly. *Of course you don’t, but I doubt you’ll take the blunt truth well either*.

He took a moment to steel himself, then explained carefully, “The truth is, Your Highness’s illness has deeply rooted itself, which has damaged your foundations. A full recovery…may no longer be possible.”

Oh? Jiang Suizhou froze.

So…perhaps Gu Changyun’s medicine had worked even better than expected, then, if it had so thoroughly fooled this seasoned palace physician.

Jiang Suizhou fixated so completely on the physician that he didn’t notice Huo Wujiu suddenly look up and frown sharply in his direction.

“Your Highness need not…pursue further treatment,” the physician continued haltingly. “If you wish to take tonics—bird’s nest, ginseng—by all means, do so. Perhaps they might…might…”

“Might what?” Jiang Suizhou demanded.

The physician swallowed hard, preparing himself to finally deliver the emperor’s message.

“They might…grant you a few more years of life.”

Silence blanketed the room, thick and suffocating.

The physician, too afraid to move, continued to press his forehead to the floor.

After a long pause, Jiang Suizhou spoke, his voice shaking slightly.

“Get out.”

The physician blinked, dumbfounded, and looked up.

Jiang Suizhou’s expression was icy, his gaze imperious as he repeated the command.

“Get. Out.”

He spat those words through clenched teeth, in a tone so dangerous that it caused the physician to instantly scramble to his feet and flee as if his life depended on it.

Now, only Jiang Suizhou and Huo Wujiu remained in the room.

Huo Wujiu’s brow was furrowed tightly.

…*What did that physician just say?*

He stared hard at Jiang Suizhou, who sat there in bed rubbing his temples quietly. His lips twitched—nearly trembled, even—as if he were struggling to suppress some emotion.

This man… Just because he stayed at Gu Changyun’s place for a few days, he…

Huo Wujiu clenched his fists, the veins on the backs of his hands bulging.

He no longer had the heart to scorn Jiang Suizhou for his wanton recklessness.

Instead, he found himself tormented by two competing impulses—first, to slaughter Gu Changyun himself, and second, to search the world for

a physician who could save Jiang Suizhou. He hated his own disabled body for rendering him powerless to do either.

Still deep in thought, he stared down at his hands.

Perhaps he could reach out to Ji Hongcheng and take the risk of seeking Lou Yue ahead of schedule. Huo Wujiu had saved the man's life, after all. With that kind of leverage, he'd be able to carve out a bloody path to freedom early.

***

It wasn't long before Meng Qianshan rushed into the room, his face heavy with sorrow. He dropped to his knees before the bed with a thud, startling Jiang Suizhou a bit at his intensity.

The physician's performance had perhaps been *too* convincing. He and Gu Changyun had only ever intended to temporarily deceive a few key people.

They'd never expected their ruse to be successful enough to make people think Jiang Suizhou was at death's door.

Jiang Suizhou nearly laughed out loud at the absurdity of it all until Meng Qianshan interrupted his thoughts with a grief-stricken wail.

"Your Highness!"

Jiang Suizhou stared at him, slightly horrified. In that moment, he suddenly felt like a memorial tablet instead of a living man.

"Stop that," he snapped, frowning.

Meng Qianshan scrubbed at his face, but it was no use. The tears kept coming, and they fell faster than he could wipe them away.

“Your Highness! We will find a physician who can cure you!” he sobbed. “And should anything happen to you, your faithful servant vows to follow you to the underworld and keep serving you there—”

“Enough! Enough, already.”

The weeping was giving Jiang Suizhou a headache.

“Fine, then. Go post notices seeking physicians. Send men to neighboring counties too,” he ordered. “Anyone with exceptional skill, whether reputable or unconventional—bring them all. Understood?”

Meng Qianshan nodded vigorously. Jiang Suizhou tossed a handkerchief at him.

“Then go do it. Stop mourning me while I’m still alive.”

Still sniffling and wiping his face, Meng Qianshan scurried off to carry out his orders.

As Jiang Suizhou watched him leave, he couldn’t help but find the situation a little comical. Although his supposed impending death was nothing but a ruse, well…he had to admit that Meng Qianshan’s reaction was oddly touching.

When he turned back, his gaze inadvertently met another almost immediately—Huo Wujiu, who’d been staring at him with furrowed brows.

Jiang Suizhou blinked and shifted himself to look at him properly.

There was no one else in the room. After his little moment of surprise, he chuckled softly.

“What, do you think I’m dying too?” he asked, his lips curved into a slight smile.

Huo Wujiu frowned harder, as if studying him intently. After a moment, he finally spoke.

“Don’t take it to heart,” he said slowly. “The imperial physicians have little experience with rare or complex ailments. You should just ignore what they say.”

Suddenly, Jiang Suizhou realized that Huo Wujiu thought he was distraught by the news, perhaps even on the verge of a breakdown. Before he could respond, though, Huo Wujiu wheeled closer.

“You will be cured,” he added softly but firmly.

Jiang Suizhou paused, startled.

Perhaps he was reading too much into it, but he swore he could hear genuine, crystal clear conviction in Huo Wujiu’s words. It sounded like a promise.

A promise made by a man who was still a prisoner himself…

What Jiang Suizhou didn’t know was that within the span of a few short minutes, Huo Wujiu had come to a decision.

He would upend his own carefully laid plans and trade his safe, steady path for a reckless shortcut through the thorns.

After all, the sooner he could break free, the sooner he could mercilessly crush every enemy who had wronged and humiliated him, then turn his blade toward the corrupt court of Southern Jing, and then…just incidentally…scour the land for someone who could save this foolish, sickly prince.

…On the side, anyway.

But Jiang Suizhou knew none of this. He could only sense the inexplicable resolve in his tone.

After a pause, Jiang Suizhou replied with words that surprised even himself.

“Of course I’ll recover,” he said quietly. “And I’ll cure you too. Do you believe me?”

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After that day, Jiang Suizhou began his peaceful period of convalescence in the comfort of his home.

His demeanor was so relaxed and unbothered that within days, Huo Wujiu knew that something was amiss. Jiang Suizhou didn’t behave like a man who was terminally ill, but like a hunter lounging beside a trap, waiting for prey to stumble in.

Why, though?

Huo Wujiu kept recalling those words Jiang Suizhou had said to him that day.

“I’ll cure you too. Do you believe me?”

Huo Wujiu wasn’t stupid; he was perfectly capable of guessing the implication behind Jiang Suizhou’s statement. However, for the first time in his life, the bold and fearless general found that he didn’t have the courage to dwell on it for long.

Besides…would anyone really harm their own health just to find a doctor for someone else?

The thought scampered through his mind like a frantic animal caught in a trap. Desperately, it beat itself against his ribs until his chest ached and he had no choice but to grab it by the scruff of its neck and lock it away in the deepest, darkest corner of his mind.

It was the first cowardly act of his life.

While the Prince of Jing's residence remained tranquil, the Ministry of Rites descended into chaos.

Though the Ministry of Justice investigated Ji You and uncovered evidence of embezzlement, they failed to locate the whereabouts of the silver in question. Following protocol, everyone involved in the banquet preparations was put under scrutiny.

Few in court had spotless records, and with the emperor personally overseeing the case, no one dared slack off. Those caught in the cross fire scrambled to protect themselves, terrified that the unrelated skeletons in their own closets might be exposed.

And while the entire court knew the Prince of Jing was gravely ill and confined to his residence, with rumors suggesting his condition might be fatal, he was still not exempt from the investigation.

However, when the official finally arrived at the prince's estate, he completed only a perfunctory inquiry before preparing to leave.

He didn't want to provoke the prince and invite trouble for himself, and why would His Highness embezzle anything in the first place? He lacked for nothing.

Besides, he was the emperor’s brother—even if he *had* taken those thousands of taels, surely he would receive a pardon.

In the official’s eyes, this was merely a formality.

His job done, the official left Anyin Hall and passed through the manor’s gardens, where the gentle breeze carried a hushed, angry voice to his ears.

“How is this my fault? This is all because of His Highness sneaking around, doting on a mistress! Where did he even get the silver to build some golden love nest for that little vixen, anyway?”

The official stopped in his tracks and turned to see who had spoken.

In a secluded corner of the garden, he spotted a stunning red-clad young man standing by the wall, hands on his hips as he let loose his complaints to a maid.

Chapter 39

BECAUSE THE GARDEN WAS so thick with trees and flower bushes, the two people talking in the shadow of the courtyard wall failed to notice the approaching official from the Ministry of Justice.

The young man in red turned toward Anyin Hall, coincidentally taking a path that led straight for the eavesdropping official. He swiftly sought cover behind a tree, concealing himself as the man stormed past.

The maid darted forward to grab the man in red.

“You mustn’t go, Mistress!” she begged. “His Highness is ill. If you go now and upset him, it might worsen his condition, and then what will we do?”

The man in red laughed in anger.

“Upset him? I highly doubt that. If he has the energy to fool around with some other man outside these walls, I’d say he must be quite healthy!” he retorted.

“How could you say such things?” the maid cried. “Besides, that gentleman the prince has been seeing… You don’t know for *sure* that His Highness purchased that residence for him.”

A sneer stretched over the man’s face.

“The Prince of Jing purchased his freedom. Where would someone like that get money to buy a house? And a south-facing courtyard in the middle of Changle Ward would cost thousands of taels, easy!”

Stammering, the maid found herself unable to continue her own argument.

The red-clad man's voice rose as his anger reached its peak.

"I've always managed this household's finances! There's no record of this expense, so you tell me—where did he get the silver to buy that vixen a house? I must demand answers from His Highness today, or he might as well sell me off and spare me this nonsense!"

The maid grabbed at him again, and the two of them continued to push and pull at each other as they made their way toward Anyin Hall.

After a very long time, the official finally emerged from his hiding spot.

His hands were trembling with shock.

Never had he imagined that a perfunctory inquiry would lead to him stumbling upon such a massive secret.

So, His Highess *had* embezzled the silver?

He'd brazenly stolen funds from the emperor's banquet, all so he could keep a mistress elsewhere to avoid the wrath of a jealous concubine?

The official lacked the authority to make any decisions on the fly, but he was still stunned. He only knew he had to return to the palace right away and report this explosive discovery to the emperor.

***

Inside Anyin Hall, spring sunlight spilled lazily across the room as Gu Changyun stormed in with his maid.

Meng Qianshan jolted in alarm at Gu Changyun's sudden arrival.

He was used to Madam Gu throwing his weight around, but he'd never barged into His Highness's courtyard like this before. Stammering, the eunuch nearly tripped over his own feet in his hurry to intercept him, though he didn't dare to act as a literal blockade.

Gu Changyun arched a brow and smiled at Meng Qianshan's dumbfounded expression.

"What's wrong, Meng Qianshan? Are you so happy to see me you forgot how to speak?"

Meng Qianshan forced a strained smile as he greeted him properly.

"Madam Gu, what special occasion brings you here today? As it happens, His Highness has just gone to rest. If you have something to say, your servant will gladly pass it on to him…"

Meng Qianshan followed beside Gu Changyun, offering placating words in an attempt to stop him. But Gu Changyun, refusing to be dissuaded, only cast Meng Qianshan a withering, sidelong glance, then shoved him aside and strode straight past him.

"Are you still trying to fool me? Did you think I didn't see someone just leaving this place?"

As he spoke, he climbed the stone steps and pushed open the door to Jiang Suizhou's main chamber.

Hearing the commotion, Jiang Suizhou glanced toward the entrance to catch sight of a fiery burst of crimson barging into his room.

He relaxed at the sight of Gu Changyun in the doorway, knowing he was here to deliver news of his successful mission.

As Gu Changyun walked into the room, he coquettishly shot Jiang Suizhou a flirty little glance that was so saccharine it made his teeth ache. He looked askance at him, and he was about to simply turn away when Gu Changyun chuckled and approached his bedside.

“Though your humble servant has arrived unannounced,” he said with a smile, “surely His Highness won’t blame me?”

Jiang Suizhou watched him coolly, letting him put on his act.

After a perfunctory bow, Gu Changyun straightened up and sat down by the bed.

“Don’t be angry, Your Highness. It’s just that I haven’t seen you in days and was worried, so I took the liberty of coming to check on you,” he said.

“Done?” Jiang Suizhou prompted, his tone indifferent.

Gu Changyun grinned, knowing exactly what he was asking, and playfully nudged Jiang Suizhou with his shoulder. “Does Your Highness not trust me?”

As he spoke, his gaze casually swept across the room. He paused briefly before swallowing the rest of his words. Even if he wanted to say more, he had to be cautious. There was someone else present.

Following Gu Changyun’s line of sight, Jiang Suizhou glanced over at Huo Wujiu sitting silently in the corner.

This wasn’t out of the ordinary. They usually coexisted in the same room, after all. His bedchamber was vast enough that they could each keep to their own space without disturbing the other.

But this time, Jiang Suizhou sensed that something was…off, somehow…about Huo Wujiu's demeanor, though he couldn't tell why exactly that might be.

Ever mischievous, Gu Changyun could not help himself. Seated by the bed, he let his eyes wander a moment before his playful nature got the better of him again.

"Oh my, how careless of me! I didn't notice Madam Huo was here too," he said with a grin.

Jiang Suizhou watched as Gu Changyun rose from his bedside and sauntered over to Huo Wujiu.

Huo Wujiu looked up impassively at Gu Changyun. Somewhere deep within those cold, dark eyes churned a whirlpool of hidden intensity.

Oblivious, Gu Changyun stopped in front of him.

"This younger brother of mine must have been kept quite busy tending to His Highness all this time," he said with a smile.

Huo Wujiu remained silent.

Gu Changyun continued to push, undeterred.

"Oh? What's Madam Huo reading?" he asked cheerfully.

He reached out and attempted to tug the book free from Huo Wujiu's grasp.

Once. Twice.

The book didn't budge an inch.

Gu Changyun blinked and stared down at Huo Wujiu, who slowly raised his eyes to stare right back. His pitch-black gaze settled quietly on

Gu Changyun’s face. The weight of it caused Gu Changyun’s smile to involuntarily stiffen, and his grip on the book loosened.

As he withdrew his hand and instinctively clasped both hands behind his back, a strange thought crossed Gu Changyun’s mind.

Had Jiang Suizhou not been watching, the man before him might have snapped his neck without hesitation.

This was a beast lying in wait, and the only thing restraining him was Jiang Suizhou’s gaze.

For the first time, Gu Changyun knew without a doubt that he had gravely overstepped. This was someone he shouldn’t have provoked.

He froze in place, unmoving.

“I’m fine. If you’re bored, go back,” Jiang Suizhou said flatly, his toneless voice cutting through the silence.

Only with that was Gu Changyun able to gradually regain his composure, though he’d already broken out in a cold sweat beneath his robes.

He was about to take a step back when he heard a soft tap.

He looked up just in time to see the book placed lightly on the nearby table. Then the man before him lowered his gaze once more, pressed a hand to his wheelchair, and wheeled himself out of the room in silence.

The sound of the wheelchair fading into the distance finally allowed Gu Changyun to look away.

Jiang Suizhou glared disapprovingly at him from his spot on the daybed.

“What were you thinking, provoking him for no reason?” Jiang Suizhou muttered disapprovingly.

Gu Changyun returned to Jiang Suizhou’s bedside, his expression pensive.

Jiang Suizhou hadn’t been privy to the brief exchange of glances between the two, being seated too far from them to see it properly. Still, he thought that Gu Changyun’s gaze seemed a bit distant as he slowly, wordlessly sat down beside him.

Jiang Suizhou jabbed a finger at him.

“Don’t expect me to save you from his wrath if you keep pestering him like that,” he said through gritted teeth.

Gu Changyun shook his head.

“I don’t think Huo Wujiu was angry because of me,” he murmured.

Jiang Suizhou frowned. “What?”

After lifting his gaze, Gu Changyun looked straight at him.

“At least, it didn’t seem like it,” he said. “Madam Huo isn’t that petty. Usually, he ignores my teasing completely, as long as I don’t touch him.”

Jiang Suizhou gave him a sidelong glance, to which Gu Changyun returned a faint smile.

“Today, it seemed more like…” Gu Changyun paused. “Well, like he was jealous.”

Jiang Suizhou froze up for a moment, then mercilessly smacked Gu Changyun on the back of the head.

“You’re out of your mind,” he said.

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Not long after that, the posted notices began to draw a steady stream of applicants to Jiang Suizhou's residence.

Jiang Suizhou didn't trouble himself with investigating their medical skills personally. He left all of that to Gu Changyun, who swiftly drove out the unqualified fame-seekers and assorted charlatans while politely dismissing others who simply lacked the necessary expertise in treating disabilities and injuries.

Over the following days, Jiang Suizhou met with several physicians, but none showed any promise.

However, finding a capable doctor would require patience—any truly skilled physician worth their salt in the Lin'an area would have already sought a position in the Imperial Hospital. The most promising applicants would likely come as the result of the scouts he had sent to search outside the capital.

Gradually, the blossoms adorning the flowering trees outside the window withered, and lush green leaves took their place.

Every couple of days, Gu Changyun briefed Jiang Suizhou regarding the latest batch of physicians he had evaluated. Recently, those reports had started to take on something of a bitter, whining tone. Apparently, some self-proclaimed miracle worker had shown up at their doorstep, claiming to be a reincarnation of Hua Tuo[3] and boasting himself capable of curing all ailments—the words of a charlatan, surely.

As if the whole thing weren't dubious enough already, the man was always shadowed by an alarmingly burly apprentice who looked more like a

bodyguard than a medical student.

However, this supposed doctor had a silver tongue. Despite Gu Changyun's attempts to expose him, he couldn't find any real flaws in his claims. Since Gu Changyun had no grounds to throw him out sight unseen, the man just stuck around, spouting grandiose promises and insisting on an audience with the master of the house.

At his wit's end, Gu Changyun finally told Jiang Suizhou that he couldn't handle it anymore and asked him to humor the man by meeting with him just long enough to justify kicking him out for good.

Jiang Suizhou, who found the whole thing rather humorous, agreed to this. He had to admit that he was a little curious to see what this quack looked like for himself.

The next morning, the self-invited physician was brought to his chambers.

He was a gray-haired man who looked to be in his sixties. Having been forewarned by Gu Changyun, Jiang Suizhou let his gaze instinctively drift past him to land on his entourage.

Behind him stood his so-called apprentice—a man in his early twenties, tall and broad-shouldered, with sharp and rigid features. Strong and well-built, the young man looked more like a soldier than anything else.

Amused, Jiang Suizhou couldn't help but sneak a few more glances at him as the two knelt and bowed.

"Gu Changyun tells me you have the skill to cure all ailments," he said languidly, waving for them to rise. He picked up his teacup before continuing, "You should know that I don't take kindly to being deceived."

As he spoke, he realized that the apprentice seemed to be gazing at a point behind Jiang Suizhou, not directly at him. Was he looking at Huo Wujiu?

“What are you looking at?” He voiced his question, frowning.

The apprentice hastily averted his eyes and lowered his head, as if startled by the sudden reprimand.

Jiang Suizhou’s frown only deepened.

In that brief moment before the man lowered his head, he thought he’d seen a glimmer of moisture in his eyes—the kind of sheen that came from someone desperately fighting back tears.

Chapter 40

JIANG SUIZHOU'S BROW FURROWED as he attempted to study the apprentice's face, but the young man kept his head bowed too low. Aside from that fleeting glimpse, Jiang Suizhou saw nothing else.

"Your Highness, may I examine your pulse?" the old physician asked, interrupting his thoughts.

Jiang Suizhou tore his gaze from the apprentice and nodded to the physician, who stood respectfully before him, waiting to take his wrist.

He cast one last glance at the apprentice before extending his arm and resting his hand on the medicine pillow the physician had set out.

"Your apprentice is rather something, isn't he?" Jiang Suizhou remarked casually as the physician placed his fingers on his wrist.

"You flatter him, Your Highness," he replied with a deferential smile. "This young fellow here used to be a farmer. A few years ago, he fled here from the north, and I happened to save his life. He's been following me around since then."

He shot a glance at his apprentice before adding, "He's from the countryside and hasn't seen much of the world. I hope Your Highness won't take offense to his behavior."

Jiang Suizhou gave a faint, noncommittal hum of acknowledgment and said nothing more.

After a moment, the physician withdrew his hand and knelt respectfully before Jiang Suizhou.

“Well?” Jiang Suizhou prompted as Meng Qianshan handed him a hot cup of fresh tea he’d fetched.

“After examining Your Highness’s pulse, I have a few humble observations. However…” He paused. “I must ask that everyone else be dismissed.”

Jiang Suizhou glanced down at him. “Oh? Is there something you can’t say in front of others?”

“Your Highness’s pulse indicates a weak constitution, but the symptoms seem superficial,” the physician replied calmly. “Rather than illness, there may be…other possibilities.”

He stopped there, lifting his eyes to meet Jiang Suizhou’s gaze, silently awaiting further instruction.

His expression was calm but alert in a way that startled Jiang Suizhou for a moment. It was then that he realized this was it, finally—this old physician was perceptive enough to discern the true nature of his condition.

Jiang Suizhou’s heart skipped a beat, and his gaze anxiously, instinctively darted toward Huo Wujiu.

He hadn’t expected this seemingly fraudulent doctor to actually have some real skill.

Fortunately, Huo Wujiu appeared oblivious to their conversation and likely unaware of the implications in the physician’s words. Sitting in his usual spot with his head bowed over a book, he gave no indication that he even heard them at all.

At the moment, the room was crowded with attendants—in addition to the naive Meng Qianshan, there were multiple maids and servants. The

fact that the Prince of Jing had poisoned himself on purpose was a closely guarded secret which Jiang Suizhou was not keen to reveal to so many ears.

“Everyone,” he said after a brief silence, “leave.”

Meng Qianshan blinked. “Your Highness?”

“Since this gentleman wishes to speak privately, I’ll hear him out,” he added, sweeping his gaze over the two once more. “Meng Qianshan, take the apprentice to the side chamber for some tea.”

Meng Qianshan quickly complied, ushering out the servants before bowing and leading the apprentice away.

Only Huo Wujiu remained.

Meng Qianshan hesitated.

Did His Highness mean even his beloved consort was to be dismissed? This man stayed in the prince’s chambers every night, but everyone was being made to leave… Did that include him?

He glanced uncertainly at Jiang Suizhou.

But before he could act, Huo Wujiu set his book aside, pressed a hand to his wheelchair, and wheeled himself out without a word.

Meng Qianshan exhaled in relief.

This master, whom the prince held so dear, was not someone he could afford to offend. Fortunately, as aloof as he could be, Huo Wujiu was perceptive enough to spare even a mere servant unnecessary trouble.

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In accordance with Jiang Suizhou’s orders, Meng Qianshan escorted the physician’s apprentice to the side chamber and invited him to sit down.

Since Madam Huo had also been dismissed, it wouldn’t do to leave him unattended, so Meng Qianshan promptly invited him into the tea room as well. As he poured some tea for both of them, Huo Wujiu’s gaze swept over the man sitting stiffly across the table.

When Meng Qianshan was done, he stood respectfully to the side, and Huo Wujiu’s focus fell on him.

The servant had never been good at hiding his thoughts. Huo Wujiu could read him like a book.

Even as the eunuch dutifully attended to Huo Wujiu and their guest, he couldn’t hide the worry etched plainly across his face. He was obviously anxious about the discussion going on in Jiang Suizhou’s quarters and wanted to go watch over them, but without any specific orders, he had no choice but to stay.

“Go do what you need to do,” Huo Wujiu said calmly.

Meng Qianshan blinked at him in surprise.

Huo Wujiu quietly set down his teacup without bothering to look up.

“You’re not needed here.”

Meng Qianshan felt as if he’d been granted a pardon.

From the moment he’d first heard this apparent genius of a physician’s words, his heart had been in his throat. All he wanted was to wait outside the door so he’d be able to rush to His Highness’s side the instant he was summoned, but he didn’t dare leave the mistress without permission. The prince had dismissed everyone, after all, including him.

Now, however, things were different—the mistress had spoken!

Meng Qianshan knew that in the absence of a direct command from the prince, following Madam Huo's orders was always the right move. Assuming the mistress simply found his presence bothersome, he bowed repeatedly in gratitude to Madam Huo as he hastily retreated.

But, of course, Madam Huo didn't spare him a single glance.

His head still lowered, he followed Meng Qianshan out of the corner of his eye. Once the servant backed out of the tea room and considerately closed the door behind him, Huo Wujiu slowly lifted his gaze to the man seated across the table.

The sound of footsteps faded away. They were alone.

For a while, Huo Wujiu didn't speak. He only stared at him with those deep, dark eyes.

Then the man lowered his head as he set his teacup down on the table. When he looked up again, his eyes were brimming with tears, red-rimmed and glistening.

He stood up and dropped heavily to his knees in front of Huo Wujiu.

"General, this subordinate has arrived too late—I deserve ten thousand deaths!"

His voice was strained with the effort to keep it low, but as he knelt, two hot tears abruptly spilled from his eyes and splashed onto the floor.

Huo Wujiu slowly closed his eyes.

"You're alive." His tone was calm, but his voice trembled faintly.

The man before him was his deputy, Wei Kai, who'd followed him since their days at Yangguan.

During the southern campaign, Wei Kai's unit was part of the first wave to cross the river. When they were ambushed and cut off from reinforcements, Wei Kai had stayed behind to cover his retreat.

Huo Wujiu had heard no word of him since they split off that day. He hadn't dared to hope this man was still alive, let alone imagine the day he would see him standing before him again, breathing and well.

His expression remained composed, but his hand gripped the wheelchair's wooden armrest tightly.

"This subordinate has clung to life in shame, unworthy to face the general again!" Wei Kai choked out, still prostrating himself on the floor.

Huo Wujiu took a deep breath. "Stand up and speak properly."

Wei Kai wiped his tears and scrambled to his feet. He stopped three paces away from Huo Wujiu and hesitated, as if fighting the impulse to rush forward.

"Sit back down," Huo Wujiu said evenly. "Wipe your face clean."

At that, Wei Kai could only back away to sit down in his original seat, scrubbing at his face fiercely until the tears finally stopped.

Huo Wujiu lowered his gaze, quietly suppressing the heat rising in his own eyes.

Suddenly, he became keenly aware that his extended captivity within an enemy nation had left him severed from his battle-hardened past. He had grown up around the battlefield, and it was forever a part of him. The soldiers and weapons were like an extension of himself.

He'd endured in silence, biding his time. Still, it surprised him to find that a trace of his former strength remained within his maimed and broken

body, even now.

Something that had always belonged to him was slowly falling back into place.

The sensation could bring men to tears, but Huo Wujiu had never been one to weep, nor would he ever show the slightest hint of vulnerability in front of others.

When he lifted his eyes again a moment later, his gaze was steady and calm.

“How many are left?” he asked.

Wei Kai paused to swallow back a sob before he could manage to reply.

“Fewer than twenty of our brothers remain,” he said in a low voice. “The Southern Jing troops were only focused on capturing you for the reward. It was…chaos. A few of us hid among the corpses and survived. Over these months, I’ve arranged for the remaining men to infiltrate Lin’an. Though our numbers are small, we’re ready to act on your orders at any moment.”

Huo Wujiu gave a faint hum of acknowledgment.

“After entering the city, I searched everywhere for news of you, General. I learned you had been imprisoned in the palace, but after that, there was no word. It wasn’t until recently…when you were so publicly humiliated by that Prince of Jing…that I finally…”

His voice broke again; he was too overwhelmed by emotion to continue.

Huo Wujiu watched as Wei Kai covered his face with one hand, on the verge of another breakdown. Clearly he felt as if Huo Wujiu had suffered an unbearable disgrace.

His reaction was a bit bewildering to witness. No matter how grave his injuries, Wei Kai had always been the type to grit his teeth and bear it without shedding a tear. Huo Wujiu had known this man since childhood, and yet it was only today that he discovered that his deputy was, in fact, made of water after all.

“Keep it together,” he said sharply.

Wei Kai responded with a small sniffle.

Huo Wujiu exhaled slowly.

“I haven’t been humiliated. Don’t dwell on it,” he said.

“But General, your legs—”

“You brought someone, didn’t you?” Huo Wujiu cut him off with a glance.

Wei Kai nodded eagerly.

“We found this man outside Lin’an. He’s a highly skilled physician, especially when it comes to treating injuries like yours. Not only can he restore the flow of qi through damaged meridians, he can even physically reconnect severed tendons. Rest assured, General! He will definitely heal you!”

Huo Wujiu acknowledged this with another hum, then paused for a moment before speaking.

“If the Prince of Jing hadn’t sought a physician, you wouldn’t have gotten in so easily,” he remarked somewhat stiffly.

“After finding the doctor, I tried every means to reach you in the Prince of Jing’s residence,” Wei Kei answered, nodding again. “But the estate is heavily guarded, and there are spies from the palace watching the perimeter, so I never found my chance.”

At this point, Wei Kai seemed to steel himself, pressing a hand to the table as he met Huo Wujiu’s gaze with fierce determination.

“In a way, through some twist of fate, that bastard prince was the one who gave me the chance to save you. The old marquis taught me to repay kindness with kindness, so General, I swear…once our mission is over, I’ll remember this ‘kindness’ and grant him the mercy of dying as a whole corpse!”

He stared resolutely at Huo Wujiu, waiting for praise from his strict, justice-driven general.

Instead, the already impassive expression on Huo Wujiu’s face grew even colder.

Wei Kai faltered, suddenly unsure.

Then, slowly, Huo Wujiu’s voice emerged through gritted teeth.

“It’s been several months since our last meeting, and you’ve grown even more presumptuous.”

Skewered by his general’s icy glare, Wei Kai floundered briefly before grasping the gist of what was going on.

Did the mere mention of the Prince of Jing fill his general with such unbridled fury?! What unthinkable torment had he endured behind closed doors?

Jaw clenched, Wei Kai relented.

“Then…then no whole corpse. Death by a thousand cuts it is! I’m especially skilled at that, General, don’t worry!”

Chapter 41

ONCE EVERYONE ELSE LEFT Jiang Suizhou's bedchamber, the only people remaining were himself and the old physician.

"Speak freely, Doctor," Jiang Suizhou said once the door was closed.

The physician knelt before his bed. "If my humble diagnosis is correct, Your Highness's current illness is caused by poisoning."

Jiang Suizhou was silent for a moment before nodding.

"Your medical expertise is impressive. I was indeed poisoned some time ago. Do you have a remedy?"

"Though Your Highness has been poisoned, the toxin is peculiar," the physician said slowly and thoughtfully. "It lingers superficially, disrupting your pulse without harming your body. With some minor adjustments and the passage of time, your recovery is certain. However…"

He hesitated, then looked up at Jiang Suizhou.

"Your Highness has suffered from a frail constitution since childhood, correct?"

Jiang Suizhou nodded. "Indeed."

"Your Highness's frailty may seem congenital, but in truth…it bears signs of being induced by medication," he replied with a frown.

Jiang Suizhou froze.

"You mean…?"

The old physician nodded.

“In my humble opinion, a thorough assessment is needed to determine the exact cause of Your Highness’s weak constitution. First, I must prepare a few medicinal formulas. Only after administering them can we pinpoint the root of the ailment,” he said.

For a moment, Jiang Suizhou was speechless.

He’d never imagined that the original prince’s supposed congenital frailty was actually the result of foul play, but upon reflection, it made sense. After all, the original Prince of Jing’s mother was the favored consort of the late emperor and had enjoyed great prestige. Her prominence would naturally invite envy.

If it wasn’t congenital, did that mean his weakness could be cured?

Jiang Suizhou did not particularly enjoy the idea of spending his life frail and often bedbound by illness, or else bursting into a coughing fit every few steps.

A flicker of hope surged in him, though he swiftly regained his composure.

“Then does that mean there’s a way to cure this illness?”

The old physician shook his head. “I must humbly admit that I can offer only a 30 percent certainty of success.”

To Jiang Suizhou, that was still hope.

“Thirty percent is enough,” he replied, unfazed. “From today onward, you shall stay in my residence and focus only on my treatment. Whatever you require, you need only ask.”

The physician bowed deeply in gratitude.

Jiang Suizhou paused.

“Are there any other ailments you specialize in?” he ventured.

The physician hesitated. “Your Highness refers to…?”

Jiang Suizhou cleared his throat, maintaining his outward indifference.

“You saw the cripple in my chambers earlier,” he said flatly.

The physician nodded cautiously.

“His disability is one thing,” Jiang Suizhou sighed, frowning, “but whenever it rains, the pain in his legs flares up terribly and keeps him up half the night. It’s…rather disruptive. See if you can alleviate his condition, if only to spare me the disturbance.”

Still kneeling, the physician looked up at him with a stunned expression.

Assuming the man was simply surprised that he’d been asked to treat a prisoner of war, Jiang Suizhou quickly made an addendum.

“Treat him as you see fit. I value my peace,” he added mildly. “If you can cure this affliction, you’ll be duly rewarded.”

He gazed down at the physician, who bowed deeply.

“I shall obey Your Highness’s command,” said the old man, pressing his forehead to the floor.

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For the first time in quite a while, arrangements were made for two honored guests to stay at the Prince of Jing’s estate.

In recognition of their skills, Meng Qianshan treated both the physician and his apprentice with the utmost respect. Following Jiang Suizhou's instructions, he ushered them into a spacious courtyard and assigned several maids to attend to them.

Jiang Suizhou made it clear that he would go above and beyond for these men.

After they'd safely arrived at the courtyard and settled in, Meng Qianshen made sure that all their daily necessities were provided for. He kept himself busy as he fretted over every tiny detail. When night fell, he finally departed with a cheerful smile.

Once the old physician led his apprentice inside and shut the door, he had only the briefest moment of quiet. Almost instantly, Wei Kai turned to him with a barrage of urgent questions about his examination of Jiang Suizhou.

The physician sat down at the table and recounted the entire conversation to him over tea.

"So the Prince of Jing was really poisoned?" Wei Kai blurted out.

The physician nodded.

"Someone has been poisoning him since he was born. How else could someone end up so frail, despite a healthy birth and a pampered childhood?"

He stroked his beard.

"Though…his most recent poisoning is rather peculiar."

"How so?" Wei Kai pressed.

The old physician pondered for a moment before shaking his head.

“Just spit it out already, Li Changning!” Wei Kai snapped, irritated by his cryptic behavior.

Li Changning clicked his tongue. “How should I know? Who would bother with such a mild, harmless poison?”

Wei Kai fell silent at that.

“And yet…it’s oddly convenient,” Li Changning mused.

“What is?” Wei Kai frowned.

“The Prince of Jing’s illness isn’t serious, yet he sought medical attention. Thanks to his doing so, we gained access to the general, something we were struggling with,” the physician said slowly. “Earlier, the Prince of Jing even went out of his way to bring up the general’s leg pain and asked me to examine him. Tell me, isn’t it strange how everything keeps lining up in General Huo’s favor?”

Those words made Wei Kai sink into thought.

“It *is* awfully convenient,” he admitted. “And the general was acting strangely earlier too.”

“Oh?”

Wei Kai met his gaze with a baffled look.

“When I said we’d repay the Prince of Jing’s ‘kindness’ by leaving his corpse intact, the general seemed displeased. Then I suggested death by a thousand cuts, and his stare turned even fiercer.”

Wei Kai paused as he suddenly seemed to recall something.

“And then…he asked whether you could cure the Prince of Jing’s illness.”

He looked at Li Changning.

“Say, what do you think the general is planning?” Wei Kai wondered aloud.

Li Changning looked right back at him in disdain.

“You’ve served him for years, and you’re asking me? I met him today!” he retorted. “You expect me to read his thoughts?”

Wei Kai shook his head, frowning. He considered the situation.

“If I had to guess, I’d say he wants him cured so he can personally torture him to death with his own hands,” he muttered finally. “And then behead him and hang his dismembered corpse from the walls of Southern Jing’s capital.”

Wei Kai paused.

“But…somehow, that doesn’t seem quite right.”

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Anyin Hall was shrouded in deep night, and Jiang Suizhou found himself in high spirits, thanks to the unexpected appearance of not just one but *several* promising developments.

First, and most importantly, he’d found a highly skilled physician who might be capable of healing Huo Wujiu’s legs. That alone was already cause for celebration, but just moments ago, he’d received additional good news from Xu Du: The emperor had taken the bait.

After the Ministry of Justice official returned to the palace, he immediately reported what he’d heard at the Prince of Jing’s residence. No doubt the emperor had been thrilled by the news, for within days, he had

dispatched the same official with soldiers to raid the south-facing residence located in the heart of Changle Ward.

Jiang Suizhou had deliberately selected two detailed enough crumbs to feed to the emperor. Fortunately, they'd proved enough to lead the officials to the right place.

Xu Du stationed a few men to monitor the area, and they reported that over the past few days, they'd identified Ministry of Justice informants surveilling the place. Once they confirmed their target, they'd finally be able to catch the true villain behind that residence.

Jiang Suizhou felt invigorated.

As he returned from his study, he spotted Huo Wujiu sitting on the edge of his own bed, reading. Jiang Suizhou's gaze lingered on him as he sat down, thinking of the newly arrived physician.

How skilled was this doctor, really? If he was half as good as he claimed, then perhaps Huo Wujiu would recover the use of his legs sooner than expected. Maybe his meridians could even be fully restored—in which case, neither the Prince of Jing's residence nor anywhere else in the entirety of Southern Jing could hold him any longer.

And if that happened, Southern Jing would fall in less than three years. None of those in charge would be able to strut about so arrogantly anymore. Not the emperor, and certainly not Pang Shao.

A fierce satisfaction surged in Jiang Suizhou's chest.

Then another thought struck him—by then, he and Huo Wujiu would have parted ways. He'd no longer have the chance to spend his days and nights with him like this.

As fearsome as Huo Wujiu seemed at first, over time he'd proven himself to be a remarkably decent person. Despite their limited and sparse conversations, the two had settled into a peaceful, comfortable coexistence. Now, a single glance was often enough for Jiang Suizhou to guess what Huo Wujiu was thinking.

It was inevitable this would have to end, yet…the realization left him feeling oddly hollow.

After all, Jiang Suizhou had few people in this era he could truly trust. Aside from his subordinates, Huo Wujiu was the person closest to him.

But even a gilded cage couldn't keep a hawk grounded forever. Huo Wujiu didn't belong here…

Lost in thought, he didn't realize that the very man he'd been pondering had long since sensed his gaze. At some point, Huo Wujiu had looked up from the book in his hands and had been watching Jiang Suizhou in silence.

Jiang Suizhou only noticed that he was under scrutiny when those dark eyes met his directly.

The sudden eye contact startled him, and he felt a momentary flicker of embarrassment. He quickly composed himself.

"That physician who came today will examine your legs tomorrow," he said coolly.

Huo Wujiu remained silent.

"But don't get your hopes up," Jiang Suizhou added. "If the imperial physicians couldn't heal you, it's unlikely he can."

With that, he turned to lie down and go to sleep. Before he could do so, Huo Wujiu abruptly spoke.

“Jiang Shunheng ordered my legs broken,” he said.

Jiang Suizhou paused. “What?”

He looked at Huo Wujiu, who silently gazed back at him.

“His intention was for me to suffer endlessly under your watch. You know this.”

This was a truth that they both implicitly understood but never acknowledged directly. Not out loud.

Jiang Suizhou sat up straighter. “And?”

Huo Wujiu exhaled slowly, a little exasperated.

“Once my legs are healed, your hand will be forced,” he said. “Have you considered how you’ll answer to him?”

Privately, Jiang Suizhou laughed to himself.

Answer to him? What do I owe a dead man? Huo Wujiu is the executioner’s blade hanging over the tyrannical emperor’s head. Freeing that blade early would be a service to the people!

A faint smile rose to his lips at the thought.

“I don’t intend to answer at all,” he said, the dim light catching the smug curve of his mouth and illuminating his striking face. “In fact, rather, I’d like to see just how he intends to punish me.”

With that, he lay back down to sleep.

In Jiang Suizhou’s mental image of that moment, his eyes were alight with the absolute certainty of a man who knew the future.

He was so convinced of this, in fact, that he didn’t notice the way Huo Wujiu stiffened at that look.

After Jiang Suizhou turned away, Huo Wujiu continued to gaze at him for a long moment, stunned, before lowering his eyes.

It must have been a trick of the light, he thought. Why else would that foolish rabbit’s eyes have shone so brightly while such brazen, reckless words left his lips?

Chapter 42

ACCORDING TO LI CHANGNING, Jiang Suizhou would need to take medicine for some time before his condition could be properly assessed.

Since Jiang Suizhou had never actually prioritized his own health in the first place, he paid little mind to the explanation. He simply instructed Li Changning to keep to his diagnosis, to prepare daily prescriptions and observe the effects.

Naturally, Li Changning complied.

On the first day of treatment, when the physician made to leave after administering the medicine, Jiang Suizhou asked him to stay back.

“Go examine his legs,” he ordered as he took the freshly brewed decoction.

Apart from Meng Qianshan, no other servants were present in the room. Li Changning glanced at Wei Kai, who imperceptibly winked. Yesterday, after Jiang Suizhou mentioned “Madam Huo’s” leg injuries, the two of them had discussed the matter extensively in private.

Understanding the signal, Li Changning bowed and made his way to Huo Wujiu’s daybed. He knelt before Huo Wujiu and carefully probed his legs.

Meng Qianshan helped Jiang Suizhou drink the bitter medicine while Jiang Suizhou waited quietly for Li Changning to examine Huo Wujiu.

The physician continued to gently press and pull, asking questions from time to time. Then he retrieved a booklet from his medicine chest and jotted down his notes and observations.

Finally, Li Changning gathered his tools and stood.

“Well?” Jiang Suizhou asked urgently.

Li Changning carefully packed up the medicine chest beside him and handed it over to Wei Kai before rising and bowing to Jiang Suizhou.

“The madam’s legs may be…troublesome to treat.” His voice carried a hint of hesitation.

Jiang Suizhou furrowed his brows, his expression growing graver.

“The tendons of his legs have been completely severed,” Li Changning continued, sighing. “They’re unlikely to fully recover. The most I can offer is some relief from the pain.”

“How?” asked Jiang Suizhou.

“If Your Highness permits, I believe my modest knowledge of acupuncture might ease his suffering on cold and rainy days, at the very least.”

Jiang Suizhou silently exhaled.

He knew from the beginning that Huo Wujiu’s injuries couldn’t be easily healed, but he’d still gotten his hopes up for Li Changning’s remarkable abilities. Perhaps this physician wasn’t the one he sought, after all.

Disappointed, he could only console himself with the promise of relief for Huo Wujiu’s pain. He suffered terribly at the lightest rain, so even a slight improvement would be worthwhile. This wouldn’t be entirely useless.

With that in mind, Jiang Suizhou nodded with trained indifference.

“No matter. I never wanted to fully treat him. Don’t worry and do what you can—there will be no repercussions no matter the results.”

Li Changning seemed to breathe a sigh of relief, and he bowed in gratitude.

Jiang Suizhou quickly waved for him to stand. As he sipped at his tea to wash away the bitterness, another thought occurred to him.

Acupuncture work required a fair amount of space, didn’t it? While the daybed in his chambers wasn’t small by any means, it wouldn’t do for Huo Wujiu to receive daily treatments there.

So, that being the case…

Jiang Suizhou swirled his cup, deep in thought.

Maybe this was the perfect opportunity to have Huo Wujiu move out.

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When Huo Wujiu first moved into his quarters, Jiang Suizhou had allowed it only because he couldn’t find a proper excuse to refuse. It was always meant to be a temporary arrangement.

Now that a legitimate reason had fallen right into his lap, Jiang Suizhou began to earnestly consider the feasibility of the matter.

After all, he’d initially brought Huo Wujiu here for his own protection. Seeing that Huo Wujiu had grown accustomed to living with him and their relationship had warmed considerably, arranging separate quarters for him under this pretext seemed both reasonable and perfectly safe.

At the same time, this could serve as an opportunity to discern Huo Wujiu's stance—testing the waters, so to speak.

His resolve set, Jiang Suizhou dismissed all the attendants during dinner that evening, leaving him alone at the table with Huo Wujiu.

Under the flickering candlelight, Huo Wujiu lifted his gaze to curiously observe Jiang Suizhou. Judging by the way things were set up, it was clear that Jiang Suizhou had something to say to him.

Perfect, Huo Wujiu thought to himself.

Because he, too, had something to tell Jiang Suizhou.

He knew that the physician and his apprentice had been withholding information from Jiang Suizhou. Moreover, he knew very well that Wei Kai never acted without certainty. The physician he found was absolutely capable of healing Huo Wujiu's legs.

Their evasiveness was purely out of caution—they feared Jiang Suizhou might grow wary of them if he learned they could heal his legs. Similarly, Huo Wujiu felt it was likely that the old man could treat Jiang Suizhou's condition as well, but he kept his words vague, probably waiting for Huo Wujiu's orders.

They didn't realize that Jiang Suizhou had never been a threat to them.

They had absolutely no idea that just yesterday, in fact, Jiang Suizhou outright told him that he intended to have his legs treated; that he even intended to face Jiang Shunheng on his behalf once he recovered.

Huo Wujiu could barely hold himself back.

He wanted to tell Jiang Suizhou everything—that this physician could definitely heal both of them, that he had nothing to fear. He wanted to tell him that Jiang Shunheng was a shared enemy, one whom he didn't need to fight alone. He wanted to tell him that once he regained the strength to oppose the emperor, he would do everything in his power to protect Jiang Suizhou.

The prince would not suffer the consequences of his actions.

Huo Wujiu had always been extraordinarily guarded and meticulous in keeping his secrets. Until recently, he wouldn't have dreamed of allowing even the slightest scrap of information regarding his circumstances to reach someone from the opposing side.

But inexplicably, Jiang Suizhou was different to him.

Perhaps it was because Jiang Suizhou was also targeted by Jiang Shunheng. Though he belonged to the enemy camp, he could never truly be one of them. Or perhaps it was because, despite the impressive sadistic villain act, this man was utterly guileless. He was harmless, which made him trustworthy.

Or perhaps…it was because he seemed to genuinely like him.

Huo Wujiu always disliked owing others, and yet this Prince of Jing had taken it upon himself to fall in love with him. Jiang Suizhou insisted on doing so much for his sake that Huo Wujiu couldn't bear to deceive him.

He even found himself wanting to lay bare all his secrets—not just because he trusted him, but more specifically because he didn't want to keep things from him.

This reluctance to hide the truth had been churning inside Huo Wujiu since yesterday, when Jiang Suizhou assured him the physician would treat

his legs.

A flame ignited in his chest that night, and it burned so fiercely it threatened to reduce his heart to ashes.

He kept all signs of that flame concealed as he calmly fixed his dark eyes on Jiang Suizhou across the table.

Once the room was completely empty, Jiang Suizhou finally spoke.

“You heard what the physician said today,” he said mildly.

Huo Wujiu acknowledged him with a noncommittal hum. He paused, about to speak, but then Jiang Suizhou continued.

“While he can’t heal you entirely, he should be able to alleviate some of the pain,” he said. “However, since the intended treatment includes acupuncture, I thought it would be more convenient to arrange separate quarters for you.”

Those words were like a gust of wind that swept through Huo Wujiu’s body, causing the little flame in his chest to flicker unsteadily.

After a brief silence, he spoke.

“That does make sense,” he said.

Jiang Suizhou nodded.

“I’ll have Meng Qianshan prepare a separate room for you in the courtyard. You can stay there and focus on recuperating. And by the way… when I said I’d allow the physician to treat you freely, those were just empty words for the sake of appearances. If he dares neglect his duty, just inform Meng Qianshan,” he said.

Oh, thought Huo Wujiu. So he’d be staying in the same courtyard.

The fleeting gust of wind vanished without a trace.

Huo Wujiu's expression remained indifferent as he gave another quiet sound of acknowledgment.

Jiang Suizhou studied his reaction before cautiously continuing.

"I never told you why I moved you to Anyin Hall in the first place, did I?"

This was the perfect moment to broach the subject. Jiang Suizhou knew that if he had revealed his intentions to treat Huo Wujiu well from the start, the man would have understandably doubted him and grown even more wary. However, if he delayed any longer, his eventual admission would seem forced as they saw each other less and less frequently.

Now was the ideal time for Jiang Suizhou to lay his feelings bare, to reveal his desire to help him and finally propose an alliance. After all, Huo Wujiu should have witnessed enough of his circumstances and actions by now to at least not discount him right off the bat.

Yet Huo Wujiu's expression suddenly turned peculiar.

After a pause, he lifted his gaze, brows slightly furrowed. "No."

Silence followed. Then, just as Jiang Suizhou opened his mouth to speak, Huo Wujiu continued.

"…But there's no need to say it."

Jiang Suizhou felt a lightning bolt of panic strike his chest.

Hang on, what do you mean by that?! I have to explain! If I don't, how will you understand my painstaking efforts? The humiliation I endured for you?! Just let me explain myself so you can be moved to tears with gratitude!

“No, I must!” he interjected quickly. “Though by now, you’ve probably guessed my intentions.”

The crease in Huo Wujiu’s brow deepened. What exactly was the Prince of Jing plotting?

Perhaps…

Was he…about to confess his feelings tonight?

The thought set Huo Wujiu’s heart racing, and when he tried to think of how he might respond to such a thing, he found his mind completely blank. Strangely, despite his uneasiness, the little flame in his chest seemed to have been doused in oil.

His pulse quickened, and the blaze within his chest roared even higher.

How could the prince be so foolish? Didn’t he fear rejection? Did he truly not care about losing face?

To his dismay, Huo Wujiu found his resolve beginning to erode against his will. He even thought that, no matter what Jiang Suizhou said next, he might not be able to refuse him.

Then the prince spoke.

“Huangxiong humiliated you, hoping to pit us against each other like some gu worms[4] in a jar. Naturally, I refuse to indulge his whims.”

His voice was like the waters of a mountain spring—calm, cool, unhurried.

“The reason I moved you into my courtyard was to protect you. Though I am from Southern Jing, my brother sees me as a thorn in his side,

desperate to rid himself of me. For now, I survive precariously, but I know the day will come when he finally eliminates me."

Huo Wujiu listened silently, allowing the prince's clear voice to flow into his heart.

"My only path to survival lies in the fall of the Jing dynasty," Jiang Suizhou continued. "General Huo, you must have realized by now—I am not like them. I have no desire to kill or humiliate you. Instead, I wish to cooperate."

For a moment, Huo Wujiu's mind went blank.

"Today, I can ensure your temporary safety," the prince said, his voice slow and deliberate. "In the future, I can help restore your legs. All I ask in return…is a chance to survive."

In an instant, all of that icy spring water rushed straight through Huo Wujiu's veins to overtake his heart. With a soft hiss, it snuffed out that once-vibrant tongue of flame.

His voice was hoarse when he made his reply.

"…Is that all?" he asked.

Puzzled, the prince met his gaze with those naive, innocent eyes.

"Yes. That's all."

Chapter 43

JIANG SUIZHOU WAS UNSURPRISED to find that his calculations were flawless. Though his heart skipped a beat when he heard Huo Wujiu's question, a surge of relief quickly followed. Everything had worked out.

He'd anticipated Huo Wujiu's lingering suspicion regarding his motives. Of course he'd never believe his reasons were purely about self-preservation under the emperor's tyranny. The emperor was petty in his cruelty, and Jiang Suizhou's life was not under any immediate threat from him.

Of course, Jiang Suizhou's *real* goal had little to do with surviving the emperor's little torments. His true aim was to keep his head from rolling under Huo Wujiu's blade.

…Not that Huo Wujiu needed to know the difference.

In any case, Jiang Suizhou felt relieved that he'd laid it all out now, despite watching Huo Wujiu's scowl gradually deepen.

He still doubts me. Of course he wouldn't trust my words so easily. It's only natural. To Huo Wujiu, I'll always be the enemy. It would be stranger if he believed me outright, no questions asked.

"I understand if you don't trust me," said Jiang Suizhou, a calm but solemn expression on his face. "To you, this must sound absurd. But—"

"I believe you." Huo Wujiu swiftly cut him off. His tone was steady, yet colder than usual.

Jiang Suizhou blinked. "What I mean is—"

“An alliance,” Huo Wujiu said shortly. “That’s what you’re proposing, correct?”

“Yes, but—”

But why did it sound so strange coming from him now?

Huo Wujiu’s dark eyes held his, unwavering.

“You’ve done your utmost to shield me. I’ve seen it,” he said in a low, measured voice. “Though I don’t know why you’ve placed such faith in me, if that day you speak of ever comes, I won’t repay your kindness with betrayal.”

Jiang Suizhou listened, stunned.

Every word in his statement made sense. The sentiment seemed perfectly aligned with what he knew of Huo Wujiu’s good, upstanding nature—not to mention, it was exactly the assurance he’d been hoping to hear.

And yet, Jiang Suizhou couldn’t shake off the feeling that something was amiss. Logically, those words should have been reassuring, but they carried an inexplicable weight as Huo Wujiu spoke them. They became somehow cold and hard, with an undercurrent of something unspoken.

“Satisfied now?” Huo Wujiu shot him an unreadable glance.

Still frozen in place, Jiang Suizhou nodded blankly.

Huo Wujiu gave him one final inscrutable look, then set down his chopsticks and left without another word.

It took Jiang Suizhou a moment to collect himself.

He picked up his teacup and took a slow sip, lost in thought.

He didn’t doubt Huo Wujiu’s sincerity—the man wasn’t one to go back on his word. But still…

He shook his head and sighed.

Maybe this was just how warriors who’d spent their lives on the battlefield sounded when they made their promises: cold and fierce.

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Huo Wujiu spent the rest of the night in a daze.

Absurd?

Well, it kind of was. Jiang Suizhou was a prince of the enemy nation; even if his circumstances were less than ideal, he still lived in relative luxury. As much as the emperor toyed with him, there was no pressing threat to his life. It was laughable to think that someone like him would pin his hopes on an enemy general and seek to cooperate with him—a disabled prisoner of war, no less.

Completely, utterly absurd.

…And yet, Huo Wujiu actually believed him.

Against his better judgment, of course. It was as if some curse had addled his mind. Normally sharp and calculating, he found himself reeling like a struck fool whenever it came to that Prince of Jing.

In hindsight, the prince’s words to the eunuch that one morning were clearly a deflection. His so-called “protection” was, as he’d admitted, just a move to thwart Jiang Shunheng’s schemes. With no allies in this viper’s nest, latching onto Huo Wujiu as his lifeline made perfect sense.

It was obvious. He should have known better, but instead he had swallowed that flimsy bunch of nonsense wholesale.

Huo Wujiu barely slept that night. At dawn, he moved straight to the suite Meng Qianshan had prepared.

He should have felt humiliated, but the emotion gnawing at his chest wasn't humiliation. It was something sour that seeped into his veins like a slow poison, leaving him restless. The sensation wasn't pain, exactly, but more of a nagging, prickly discomfort.

It was something he'd never experienced firsthand until now: grievance.

The Anyin Hall compound was vast, with plenty of spacious rooms to choose from. Eager to please, Meng Qianshan worked through the night to prepare the sunniest eastern wing for Huo Wujiu.

This particular room was nearly as large as the main suite, and it offered the best sunbathing spot in the courtyard.

His efforts were partly to curry favor with the notoriously difficult Madam Huo.

Unfortunately, the madam remained in a foul mood, regardless. His expression was even colder than usual, and he radiated a truly terrifying aura. Though clueless about the cause, Meng Qianshan was perceptive enough to know he should make a hasty retreat after ushering him inside.

By midmorning, Li Changning and Wei Kai had finished attending to Jiang Suizhou. The herbal regimen would take several days to show full effect, so after checking Jiang Suizhou's pulse, Li Changning simply made a few adjustments to the prescription and handed it off to Meng Qianshan for brewing.

Once they finished up with the prince, the maids escorted them to Huo Wujiu's new quarters. Soon after their arrival, Li Changning fabricated an excuse to dismiss all the attendants. Only when the three were alone did he approach Huo Wujiu, medicine chest in hand.

"General Huo." He bowed deeply.

Huo Wujiu set aside the book he'd been pretending to read and leveled a gaze at them.

"General, Physician Li is here to treat your injuries!" Wei Kai announced, grinning widely.

He swiftly maneuvered the wheelchair toward the bed as he continued, "You might not have realized yet, General, but everything he told the Prince of Jing yesterday was a ruse! Your disability was caused by a blade, and after his examination yesterday, Physician Li is certain he can heal it completely. One hundred percent certain!"

Huo Wujiu's expression remained indifferent.

Wei Kai instantly understood. He scratched the back of his head and chuckled sheepishly.

"Right, I thought so. Of course you caught on right away, General."

"And what about the prince's illness?" Huo Wujiu asked abruptly.

Both Wei Kai and Li Changning froze. They exchanged a brief, uncertain glance—obviously, treating the Prince of Jing was only a pretext to infiltrate his household.

So…why would the general ask about that?

After a short silence, they met Huo Wujiu's pitch-dark gaze.

"Can it be cured or not?" he prompted. "Give me a straight answer."

“General, his weak constitution stems from being poisoned during childhood,” Li Changning explained hurriedly. “An instant cure is impossible, but with proper herbs and gradual treatment, the root cause could be eradicated, perhaps in around three to five years.”

Huo Wujiu lowered his gaze. He said nothing.

Li Changning looked at him for a moment before his eyes darted to Wei Kai, utterly lost.

“Then…does the general wish for me to cure him, or perhaps not?”

Huo Wujiu looked up again, and suddenly his expression became so cold his eyes were practically glazed with frost.

Did his opinion matter in all this? Their relationship was merely a transactional collaboration. His duty was to protect the Prince of Jing. Nothing more. There was no reason to concern himself with who had caused the prince’s ailments, nor the fact that he was suffering.

“Why are you asking me?” Huo Wujiu answered, his voice like ice.

This only bewildered Li Changning even further, but Huo Wujiu wasn’t finished speaking.

“You’re here as his physician. Why wouldn’t you focus on the cure? Do you wish for his retaliation instead?”

A shiver ran down Li Changning’s spine.

Of course…that did make sense. He should have guessed—after all, it was common knowledge that the Prince of Jing was not exactly a kindhearted soul.

And yet, something in the general’s tone sounded strangely insistent that the prince should be cured.

Flummoxed, Li Changning defaulted to compliance.

“Understood! I will continue to follow your orders most humbly, General Huo, and spare no effort in curing His Highness!”

Wei Kai’s eyes nearly bulged from their sockets, and he looked like he desperately wanted to kick Li Changning.

Didn’t he know how much the general loathed the prince? What kind of imbecile was this doctor to offer such a thing?!

But Huo Wujiu only responded with a soft grunt of acknowledgment.

“Mm,” he intoned. After hesitating for a moment, he added, “Don’t tell him.”

Li Changning nodded vigorously.

Wei Kai gaped. “General…why?”

Huo Wujiu’s lips parted, then he swallowed the unspoken words back down.

Jiang Suizhou’s recovery would take years, which meant that the fewer people who knew about it, the better. Jiang Shunheng wouldn’t notice immediately, but he would do everything in his power to stop it once he did. If even the smallest of rumors leaked, the emperor—

Wait. Why was he strategizing for the prince?!

A wave of irritation flooded Huo Wujiu’s mind. He remained silent for a moment, then answered coldly.

“Leverage for the future.”

The doctor’s and his apprentice’s faces lit up with comprehension. As expected, the general was always ten steps ahead, with foresight far beyond his subordinates.

Only Huo Wujiu himself knew the turmoil he felt within.

The Prince of Jing had no hidden agenda and genuinely sought cooperation. For Huo Wujiu, the situation should have been straightforward and gratifying. The displeasure he felt was just the sting of initially being misled, as if he were a fool like Meng Qianshan.

But if that had really been all it was, this emotion should have faded quickly. Somehow, it only festered as time dragged on.

It didn't make sense. Why did he feel like he'd just lost something of great importance?

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Jiang Suizhou woke up to find his room absent of a presence.

Huo Wujiu was already gone.

Meng Qianshan soon informed him that Madam Huo had risen early and moved out as soon as he learned his quarters were ready.

Jiang Suizhou thought he should feel relieved.

After all, what adult wouldn't want their own private space? Circumstances had forced them to live together for so long, but now the whole ordeal was finally over.

Even better, they'd laid everything out between them before he left. Huo Wujiu had given him his word that he would protect him, thus sparing him from his vengeance, and Jiang Suizhou no longer feared losing his life at Huo Wujiu's hands. This was a day of nothing but good news for Jiang Suizhou, truly.

And yet, for some reason, he felt like something was missing.

Perhaps it was because the period of forced cohabitation lasted for so long and began so soon after he transmigrated to this era. Not to mention the fact that Huo Wujiu was such a quiet and undemanding roommate, never causing him the slightest trouble.

Now, the room felt much emptier than Jiang Suizhou expected, as if lacking a vital element.

Subconsciously, these vague feelings lingered in Jiang Suizhou's heart, and he ended up eating much less at breakfast.

While attending to him, Meng Qianshan noticed this behavior immediately.

Once Jiang Suizhou finished eating and took his medicine, he settled by the bed with a book. Meng Qianshan sidled up to him with a grin.

"The sun is lovely this morning, isn't it? And since Your Highness has nothing urgent to do today, why not go out for some fresh air? You could even stop by the eastern wing to see how Madam Huo's treatment is going."

Chapter 44

JIANG SUIZHOU'S REPLY was automatic and immediate.

"Sure."

Only after it had left his mouth did he realize what he'd agreed to. He froze, the book in his hand lowering slightly.

There was no need to further appease Huo Wujiu. They had already settled things between them, and Jiang Suizhou had his word that he would receive his protection. Why keep fussing over him now that they had an understanding?

Jiang Suizhou opened his mouth with the intention of taking back his answer, but before he could say a word, his gaze drifted involuntarily to the daybed. It had already been tidied up, its surface smooth and free of wrinkles. The cozy blankets that once lay atop it had been folded and stowed away.

It looked so…bare, like it was missing something.

In fact, as Jiang Suizhou's eyes lingered there, the entire bedchamber suddenly felt impossibly large—so vast and empty, it seemed hollow.

He fell silent. Beside him, Meng Qianshan's face brightened with barely contained delight.

Just look at this! His Highness is reminiscing at the sight of that daybed!

Congratulating himself on the brilliance of his suggestion, Meng Qianshan didn't even wait for Jiang Suizhou to finish his thought. He

swiftly fetched an outer robe for his master to wear outside and held it out, grinning broadly.

Jiang Suizhou stared at the robe in Meng Qianshan's hands, briefly hesitating as he attempted to reason with himself.

What's the big deal? I can visit Huo Wujiu's new quarters if I want to. This is my estate—I can go wherever I please. No need to overthink it.

With that thought, he stood and let Meng Qianshan drape the robe over his shoulders.

Somehow, as the soft and luxurious fabric settled around his shoulders, the pensive gloom that had weighed him down all morning seemed to dissipate like fog.

Jiang Suizhou glanced out the window.

I really should go out and get some sun, he thought.

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After Li Changning carefully laid out the acupuncture tools from his medicine chest, he instructed Huo Wujiu to lie down on the bed. Then he rolled up Huo Wujiu's pants to reveal his mangled legs, covered in a variety of still-healing wounds.

While Huo Wujiu had recovered a fair amount overall, the fresh scars and lingering gashes marring both legs remained a rather gruesome sight. Wei Kai couldn't stop himself from tearing up, and he forced himself to look away as the physician began his examination.

“Your legs have yet to heal, General, but that makes the treatment process easier as well,” remarked Li Changning. “It’s good that we made it here as quickly as we did. If we’d waited another year or so, you’d likely suffer lasting complications regardless of treatment.”

Huo Wujiu didn’t respond.

He knew that this was yet another debt he owed to the Prince of Jing.

If the prince hadn’t feigned illness and let Li Changning and Wei Kai into the estate, it would’ve been impossible for Huo Wujiu to meet these men soon enough to fully recover his legs. Because of Jiang Suizhou’s actions, Huo Wujiu would be quickly and more effectively cured.

His father had taught him long ago to never owe anyone a debt. Not unless there was no other choice. The more you owed to someone, the more bound to them you became, until you were no longer in control of your own fate.

Being indebted was never a good thing.

Huo Wujiu closed his eyes briefly.

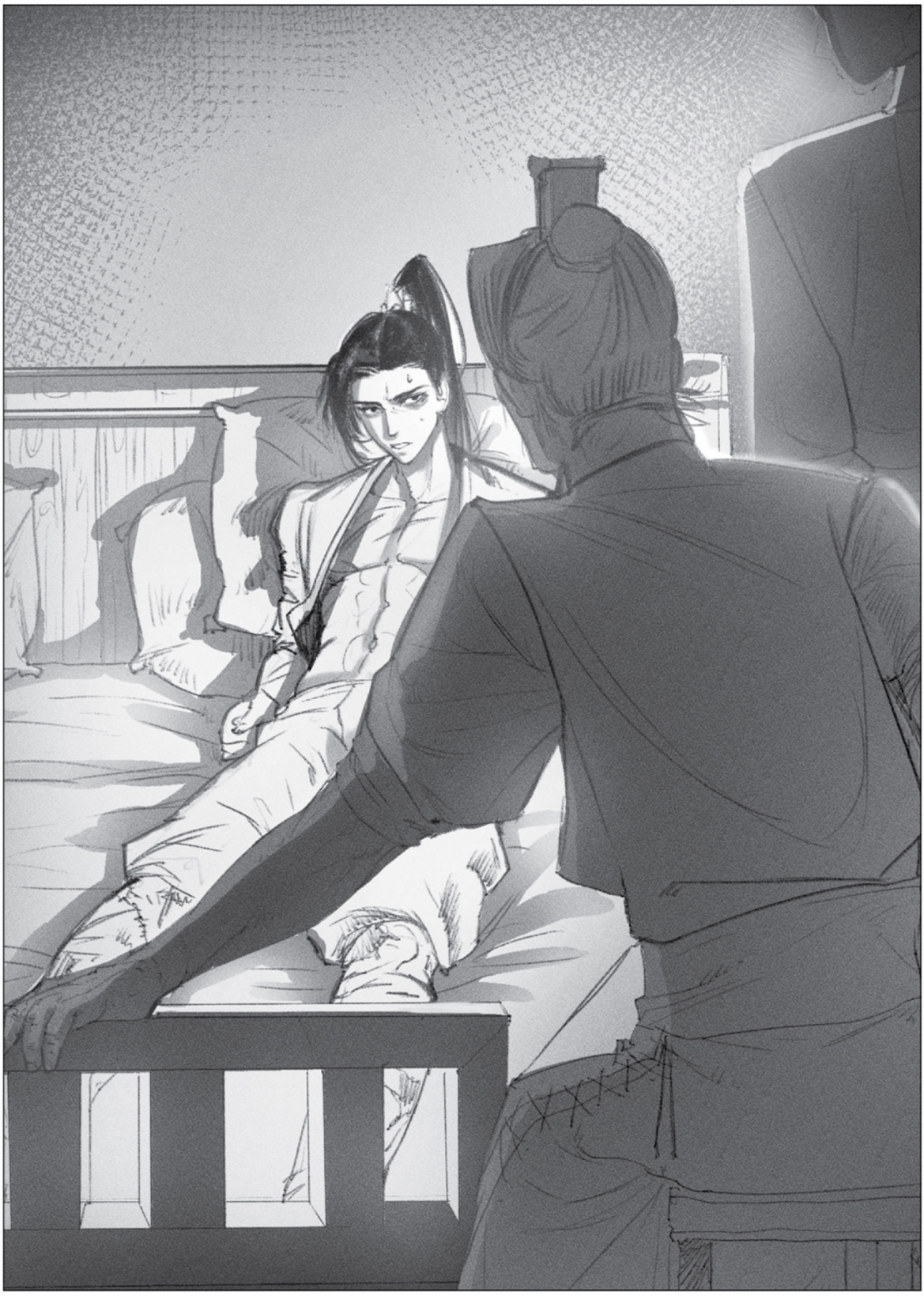
Still, what he owed the Prince of Jing was far less than he’d thought. He could easily repay this small favor in the future. It was manageable, in stark contrast to the unrequited feelings he’d imagined the prince harbored for him. That would be a debt he could never repay…

He should have felt content, but for some reason, he didn’t.

The tangled knot of emotions within him, restless and suffocating, had suddenly loosened, but it didn’t unburden him in the slightest. On the contrary, he’d been granted too much freedom all at once. This unsettling lightness gnawed at him until it left him agitated and hollow.

Oblivious to his patient’s inner turmoil, Li Changning continued speaking.

“Even so, you should know that healing these injuries will require enduring considerable pain. Starting today, I’ll administer daily acupuncture along with the medicine. The needles will help restore the flow of qi and blood through your meridians as the medicine reconnects the severed pathways.”



The physician hesitated for a moment.

“But reconnecting the tendons will cause excruciating pain, possibly lasting six to ten hours each time,” he added cautiously. “After careful consideration, I have to suggest halving the dosage. It’ll slow the process, but it won’t be as torturous—”

“No need,” Huo Wujiu interrupted.

Li Changning looked at him, stunned momentarily, before hurrying to explain.

“General, this is no ordinary treatment—reconnecting tendons is an agony akin to having your bones scraped. Even if your body were forged from steel, it would be nigh unbearable to endure this day after day!”

“How long will recovery take with the full dosage?” Huo Wujiu countered.

“At least twenty days,” Li Changning answered. “A month at the most.”

“And half?”

“Around three months. But General, rest assured—”

“Then it’s settled,” Huo Wujiu cut in, fixing Li Changning with an intense gaze. “I don’t have time to waste here. Proceed as planned with no reductions.”

Baffled, Li Changning had no reply.

The Prince of Jing’s estate wasn’t exactly a pleasant place, but it was relatively safe for the time being. Why was the general in such a hurry?

When he glanced back at Huo Wujiu, the man had already closed his eyes, seemingly resting. Left with no choice, Li Changning acquiesced and

turned to prepare the needles.

Unnoticed by the others, hidden in Huo Wujiu’s sleeve, his left hand clenched tightly in quiet frustration.

There was no urgent matter awaiting him, of course, and the Southern Jing court wouldn’t kill him anytime soon. Besides, the newly established Northern Liang dynasty lacked both funds and capable generals at the moment. It wasn’t feasible to expect to be rescued in the near future.

Yet he needed to repay his debt to the Prince of Jing as quickly as possible.

He told himself his restlessness stemmed solely from this favor that he owed. Once it was settled, he’d return to being the untouchable General Huo Wujiu, no longer distracted by some irrelevant prince, no longer so irritated he wished to kill someone.

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As the sun climbed higher, Wei Kai tended to the medicine simmering on a small clay stove, occasionally stealing glances at the patient on the bed.

Silver needles now dotted Huo Wujiu’s legs, glinting faintly in the sunlight.

Even from a distance, the sight sent a shiver down Wei Kai’s spine.

How could anyone endure so many needles? Just imagining them piercing his own skin made his hair stand on end.

But his general was different, and Wei Kai had blind, almost religious faith in the man's abilities. In all the years he'd followed Huo Wujiu, had there ever been a task the general couldn't accomplish? A hurdle he couldn't overcome?

Never.

Even their recent capture after crossing the river wasn't the general's fault—it was Northern Liang's forces that had failed them.

The thought darkened Wei Kai's mood.

Wu Qianfan…

Both he and Wu Qianfan had once served under the late Marquis of Dingbei. After the marquis's death, they pledged themselves to his son and became his most trusted aides.

Wei Kai was the simpler of the two, while Wu Qianfan was quite sharp and always flawlessly handled any task entrusted to him.

That was why, during the river crossing, Wei Kai stayed by the general's side as he led the vanguard, and Wu Qianfan split off to command the rest of their army, which was tens of thousands strong. Their plan was straightforward: Huo Wujiu's vanguard would cross first under cover of night and lie in wait outside the Southern Jing capital. Then, Wu Qianfan would lead the main force across the river to rejoin the general and launch the final assault.

But inexplicably, Southern Jing's defenses were already prepared to meet them. General Huo's vanguard ended up trapped south of the river. Worse yet, Wu Qianfan never showed up with his troops. He never sent any word at all, in fact.

Had something gone wrong?

Wei Kai and Wu Qianfan grew up together at Yangguan, orphans taken in by the marquis, and Wei Kai never once doubted Wu Qianfan's character. Something must have happened… Maybe they were ambushed mid-crossing? Or perhaps the river's currents had delayed them?

Even as he scrambled to survive with the remnants of their troops and keep an ear out for intel about their general, Wei Kai kept searching for news from Northern Liang.

But no information ever came.

Lost in thought, Wei Kai stared blankly at the pot of medicine until a crisp voice shattered the silence.

"His Highness the Prince of Jing has arrived," a maid announced.

Startled, Wei Kai looked at Li Changning, who had nearly finished inserting the needles.

Their eyes met, and Li Changning gestured subtly toward the stove.

Wei Kai turned just in time to see the decoction boiling over. He hastily pulled it from the heat.

In the panic, neither of them noticed when the sound of footsteps came to a stop outside the door. They looked up to find the Prince of Jing already standing there in the doorway. He was draped in a dark cloak, his demeanor effortlessly regal as he strode inside.

Wei Kai and Li Changning hurried to bow, but the prince waved a hand dismissively before they could fully kneel.

"Rise. Carry on as you were. I'm merely here to observe."

Wei Kai peeked at the prince as he approached the bed.

He took one glance at the general’s legs, then immediately averted his gaze. It was brief, but Wei Kai caught it. Evidently, the prince found the sight of those needles upsetting.

Wei Kai scoffed inwardly.

Typical Southern Jing nobility. Ruthless in action, yet squeamish at the sight of suffering. How many had this prince harmed, only to flinch at a few needles?

Pathetic cowards.

Nothing like the general—calm and unflinching even as needles pierced his flesh, enduring the pain by meditating deeply…

Hm? General?

Amid his gloating, Wei Kai’s gaze drifted to Huo Wujiu, who had been perfectly still this entire time. Though his face was obscured by the bed’s curtains, Wei Kai was standing at the perfect angle to catch a glimpse of it through the gap.

And what he saw left him completely and utterly dumbfounded.

The great General Huo was currently watching the Prince of Jing through the heavy cotton curtains with an expression Wei Kai had never seen before.

Those eyes—usually cold, detached, as if the world meant nothing—betrayed something hiding beneath his stony, emotionless face. It was subtle, but Wei Kai could see a flicker of something warm and complex, akin to joy, yet deeply tangled with resentment.

It was almost like Huo Wujiu had been waiting eagerly for the prince to arrive, but he was also desperate to hide that fact.

“It’s a tonic to strengthen the madam’s constitution,” Li Changning responded to something the prince said, smiling obsequiously. “His body has weakened after being confined indoors so long. Without it, the acupuncture would be too much to bear…” Whatever he said after, Wei Kei didn’t catch.

He was too stunned. He continued to gape at Huo Wujiu until Li Changning’s voice snapped him back to reality.

“What are you staring at, idiot?”

Flustered, Wei Kai just blinked in surprise as Li Changning whisked the medicine pot away.

Wei Kai was still in shock; his eyes darted back to Huo Wujiu.

This time, the general was looking directly at him with those frigid, obsidian eyes—and it froze the very blood in Wei Kai’s veins.

Suddenly, it was as if the depth that Wei Kai had glimpsed there moments ago had never existed in the first place.

…He must have imagined it.

Definitely imagined it.

What reason would their general have to stare so deeply at the Prince of Jing?

If there was a reason at all, surely it was rooted in the desire to eliminate him altogether.

Chapter 45

BEFORE TRANSMIGRATING, Jiang Suizhou had always been healthy. He had little experience dealing with needles in any context, let alone acupuncture, so he really had been badly startled by the scene before him. And with Huo Wujiu's wounds still unhealed, the sight of those needles was downright gruesome.

Jiang Suizhou averted his eyes almost immediately, as if he'd been scalded.

He could only imagine how painful it must have been.

Though he'd only caught a brief glimpse, he couldn't help but empathize; it somehow felt like he were the one being stabbed with needles.

Meng Qianshan guided him to sit on the nearby daybed and poured him a cup of hot tea, but Jiang Suizhou didn't spare him a single glance. His gaze remained fixed on the physician.

Li Changning waited quietly next to the bed, idly watching the hourglass atop the medicine chest. When the sand had fully drained, he stepped forward and deftly removed the needles from Huo Wujiu's legs.

Once he'd wiped the needles clean and stored them away, Jiang Suizhou spoke up.

"Finished?"

Li Changning nodded. "All that's left is for Madam Huo to drink his medicine."

"What medicine?" Jiang Suizhou prodded.

“It’s a tonic to strengthen the madam’s constitution,” the physician replied with a smile. “His body has weakened after being confined indoors so long. Without it, the acupuncture might be too much to bear…” He added, “It also contains herbs to replenish his qi and blood.”

Jiang Suizhou gave a slight nod and didn’t press further.

Li Changning turned to instruct his apprentice to bring the medicine, but the man seemed distracted. Even after Li Changning called his name twice, he remained unresponsive.

With an admonishment, Li Changning fetched the medicine himself before presenting it to Huo Wujiu at the bedside.

Huo Wujiu sat up and took the bowl.

Jiang Suizhou couldn’t help but stop to watch him for a moment. However, Huo Wujiu didn’t so much as glance his way. He behaved as if Jiang Suizhou weren’t there at all…just like he always did in their shared quarters.

Unconsciously, Jiang Suizhou found the corners of his mouth curving up. This familiar display of indifference was strangely comforting, and it even seemed to fill a bit of the vague emptiness he’d felt all morning.

Once Huo Wujiu finished the medicine, Li Changning hesitated, then knelt before Jiang Suizhou.

“Your Highness, today’s treatment is complete,” he said. “Unless you require something else, your humble physician will take his leave…”

Li Changning knew from years of experience just how quickly the oral medicine would take effect. They had perhaps fifteen minutes at most.

The process of repairing tendons was, naturally, incredibly painful.

He'd treated similar cases, and every time the medication took effect, his patients would be gripped by excruciating pain. Normally, he administered half the dose he'd given Huo Wujiu, yet each one still writhed in agony, their faces twisted in torment. The level of suffering could vary; however, simply not passing out from the pain meant a patient had been quite fortunate.

He couldn't let the Prince of Jing see this, lest he grow suspicious. After all, he'd claimed his treatments would alleviate Huo Wujiu's suffering. If the prince saw the opposite, he'd be sure to demand answers.

So he had to get the Prince of Jing out—and fast.

Li Changning's plan was simple but foolproof. Once dismissed, he'd pretend to remember an adjustment he'd neglected to make to the prince's own prescription. That should be enough pretext to lure him away, particularly given his usual indifference to Huo Wujiu's condition.

But then the prince leaned back against the daybed's cushion.

"Ah," he said coolly. "How did the treatment go today?"

Li Changning was taken aback.

Why wasn't the Prince of Jing following the playbook?!

He glanced up at him carefully. The prince lounged lazily on the daybed, exuding an air of relaxed ease, yet his expression was inscrutable as he regarded Li Changning.

Was this genuine concern…or a test?

Li Changning could never have guessed that Jiang Suizhou simply *wanted* to linger, of course. The physician was on tenterhooks as he did his utmost to deliver a quick and cautious report for him.

He chose his words with care, ensuring they were precise, concise, and flawless. Even if the Prince of Jing was suspicious, Li Changning would give him no foothold for argument.

Once he finished speaking, Li Changning kept his head bowed, silently praying the prince would leave. He counted the seconds until…

The prince raised a hand.

Li Changning tensed, waiting for his wave of dismissal. Then he could leave and trick the prince into following him out, and everything would be fine.

But the Prince of Jing just picked up his teacup and took a sip.

And then he kept asking questions.

How long until they'd see results? Any side effects from the acupuncture? Which acupoints had they chosen? He wanted to know about it all.

It's over, Li Changning despaired.

Nervously, he answered every question while mentally tracking the time. Those fifteen minutes trickled away like water, and suddenly the dreaded moment arrived.

Li Changning's heart was in his throat.

But the seconds went by, and the seconds turned into minutes, and still the man on the bed remained silent. The fifteen minutes had long since passed at this point, and their quiet conversation remained the only sound in the room.

Li Changing gradually relaxed.

Of course. General Huo couldn’t be held to the same standards as ordinary men. He was capable of enduring this; he didn’t need Li Changning to cover for him.

Li Changning felt more and more at ease, his replies growing smooth and effortless as he conversed with the Prince of Jing.

However, in his relief, he failed to notice that the prince was only becoming more distracted.

His gaze kept drifting toward the bed.

Huo Wujiu usually ignored him but never this thoroughly; he was lying there as if Jiang Suizhou were air. Jiang Suizhou couldn’t help but wonder if this had anything to do with their conversation at dinner the other day. It seemed this attitude had started there.

Had he said something to offend him?

Maybe…he should find an excuse to check on him?

While he listened to Li Changning with only half an ear, Jiang Suizhou’s thoughts kept circling back to Huo Wujiu until finally, he made up his mind.

I’m already here, so what’s the point of being embarrassed now? he chastised himself.

Li Changning was in the middle of fervently explaining his acupuncture techniques, detailing which meridians they could activate and the effects of each. Abruptly, Jiang Suizhou raised a hand to cut him off mid-sentence.

Startled by the sudden interruption, he glanced up just in time to see the Prince of Jing stand and walk to the bedside.

“And you? Do you feel any better?” he asked.

Li Changning wasn’t sure if it was his imagination, but his tone seemed a touch softer when he spoke to General Huo.

The only reply the general could manage was a quiet grunt. His voice was a little hoarse, but he kept it steady.

There was no way for the Prince of Jing to tell the sheer agony he was in.

Jiang Suizhou merely returned an acknowledging hum of his own, and Li Changning’s heart settled back into his chest.

But then he saw the prince’s back stiffen.

Next, he heard the Prince of Jing speak, and his voice sent Li Changning plunging into an icy abyss.

“Why is his face so pale?”

***

Only when Jiang Suizhou stepped closer did he notice that Huo Wujiu’s lips were unnaturally pallid and his forehead glistened with a thin layer of sweat. His eyes remained closed until Jiang Suizhou’s approach finally registered. Then he forced them open, regarding him with his characteristic impassive expression.

But Jiang Suizhou saw through it immediately—this man was pushing through the pain.

Alarmed, Jiang Suizhou yanked Li Changning over to have him assess his condition. The physician trembled as he checked Huo Wujiu’s

pulse.

“Your Highness, s-some discomfort after acupuncture is…normal,” he offered weakly.

“Normal?” Jiang Suizhou repeated, his tone frost. “Then why wasn’t I warned?”

Jiang Suizhou didn’t buy any of it. Huo Wujiu had an inhuman tolerance for pain—a bit of “discomfort” wouldn’t cause a reaction like this. The agony had to be unbearable.

Before Li Changning could respond, Jiang Suizhou seized him by the collar. His grip was weak, but the fury in his eyes was terrifying.

“If anything happens to him under your care,” he hissed, “I’ll have your head.”

Li Changning shuddered.

Wasn’t the prince supposed to despise the general? Why did he look ready to kill for him now?

“Y-Your Highness, please!” he stammered. “The pain is temporary! Once the meridians are fully unblocked, it’ll ease significantly—”

“How long?” Jiang Suizhou demanded.

“A-about a month…”

Jiang Suizhou laughed humorlessly and shoved the physician away.

“A whole month of torture? You claimed this treatment would relieve his suffering, not worsen it. You dare lie to me?”

Li Changning’s mind raced, but no excuses came.

Then, a hoarse voice spoke from the bed.

“It’s fine.”

Jiang Suizhou turned to see Huo Wujiu pushing himself upright, movements strained but deliberate.

“It’s just how the treatment is,” Huo Wujiu said. “Leave him be.”

Li Changning’s stomach dropped.

Surely this could only make the situation worse. If the general jumped in to defend him now, the prince’s suspicion would inevitably explode into full-blown fury. The physician’s knees went weak at the mere thought, and he kept his head lowered, bracing himself for the outburst.

But instead, he heard a slow, controlled exhale come from the Prince of Jing.

“Get out,” he said flatly. “If he isn’t better in a month, I’ll come for your head.”

Li Changning knelt there, stunned.

That…was it?

***

After the physician and his apprentice hurried out, the room fell suddenly and intensely silent. Jiang Suizhou still stood by the bed, his eyes locked on Huo Wujiu.

Huo Wujiu returned his gaze.

Just a moment ago, the Prince of Jing seemed genuinely furious, but all that icy ferocity melted away without a trace. Backlit by the window, his expression remained cool, yet his eyes betrayed a flicker of helplessness.

Those eyes kept darting toward Huo Wujiu’s legs.

Slowly, the irritation that had festered in Huo Wujiu’s chest for days began to erode, replaced by reluctant resignation.

No wonder he’d misunderstood—clearly this man did not know how to distinguish between an ally and a lover. Their connection should’ve been purely transactional, yet here he was at Huo Wujiu’s bedside. Jiang Suizhou’s outpouring of concern seemed so genuine that it was impossible for Huo Wujiu to express any displeasure on his part, for it would just feel petty and cruel.

“Anything else?” Huo Wujiu finally asked, his tone even.

Jiang Suizhou blinked, as if snapping out of a daze. “I just…wanted to check on you.”

“I’m fine,” said Huo Wujiu curtly.

The prince shifted his weight from one leg to the other, as if urging himself to leave, yet his feet stayed rooted. Then, suddenly assuming a haughty glare, he dropped his gaze to survey Huo Wujiu.

“Oh, so you’re fine, are you? You said the same thing when it rained, as I recall, and look how that turned out.”

Without waiting for a response, he cast an authoritative look at Meng Qianshan, who instantly understood the unspoken order. He fetched a chair and placed it by the bed.

Jiang Suizhou settled into it with regal poise, his demeanor brooking no argument.

“I’ll keep an eye on you.”

Huo Wujiu shot him a sidelong glance.

“Suit yourself.”

The prince said nothing more. Meng Qianshan brought him a book, which he accepted silently and started to read.

For a moment, Huo Wujiu watched Jiang Suizhou.

Though he should have thought this man detestable—absolutely infuriating, even—he carried an inexplicable sweetness. The mere thought of him grated on Huo Wujiu’s nerves. Yet whenever he saw this man, Huo Wujiu was unable to stop his lips from curving.

How ridiculous.

Chapter 46

JIANG SUIZHOU PRETENDED to focus on his book, but his attention never left Huo Wujiu. He knew this man would rather die than admit pain, so waiting for him to speak up would be a fool's errand.

But, even if he were suffering, there wasn't much that Jiang Suizhou could do. Still, he kept stealing worried glances at him.

Huo Wujiu sat rigid and silent against the headboard, eyes closed, as if he were resting; only his ashen complexion, bloodless white lips, and tightly knitted eyebrows suggested anything otherwise.

Something twisted in Jiang Suizhou's chest.

He'd always hated seeing others endure pain alone. He thought about it for a moment before finally venturing a modest suggestion.

"Would you like a book?"

Huo Wujiu opened his eyes.

Jiang Suizhou met his gaze earnestly. "It might help distract you."

He meant it. As a child, he'd never enjoyed television or video games. They were aggravatingly noisy, and his home was chaotic enough already. In a household flooded with endless problems, he found refuge in the study. Though the books there were on complex subjects and mostly meant for adults, they captivated him. Hours would pass without him noticing.

Huo Wujiu studied him silently. He had no idea what Jiang Suizhou was thinking, nor what he'd been through. He only knew he found books to be headaches, ever since childhood.

Although he frequently spent his days reading now, it was only because there was nothing else to do, as immobilized as he was. It was a torture akin to forcing a bandit to chant sutras.

For some reason, though, Jiang Suizhou's offer didn't annoy him.

Stranger still, he found that the prince's neutral expression reminded him of a poised teacher.

And Huo Wujiu had always hated teachers.

Yet another thing about this man that should have annoyed him but did not. In fact, the idea fit the Prince of Jing oddly well. It felt like he'd never truly been that domineering, high-and-mighty prince to begin with, but rather a scholar steeped in the scent of ink.

If he were a teacher…

He likely wouldn't be the type to force students to read at ruler-point. He would be gentler in his encouragement, and his earnest gaze alone would make people want to listen to him.

Huo Wujiu found himself momentarily dazed.

Jiang Suizhou tilted his head. "Huo Wujiu?"

The prince's voice snapped Huo Wujiu back to attention just in time to see him gesture to Meng Qianshan.

"Shall I have him fetch you a book?"

Huo Wujiu stared silently at him for a moment before deciding he must have lost his mind earlier.

"No need," he answered and shut his eyes again.

Reading was out of the question. The only reason he ever subjected himself to that particular brand of torment was sheer boredom. Right now,

he was in so much pain that it felt as if every fiber of his being was on fire. Even speaking took effort. Why make it worse?

Besides, he had spent a lifetime receiving a variety of gruesome injuries, and he knew how to push through pain. Silently, he resumed reciting the mental mantra his martial arts master had drilled into him, as was his custom. It didn't dull the pain, but it helped him focus and endure it.

Jiang Suizhou misinterpreted his silence entirely.

He must have paused because he was distracted by pain, and he must have declined the book because his vision was swimming from the terrible agony he was enduring. Perhaps he was even physically unable to read at the moment, having no energy to spare.

Suddenly, an absurd impulse seized Jiang Suizhou.

"Then…shall I read to you?"

Jiang Suizhou regretted his words the instant they left his mouth. He froze up completely.

What am I doing?!

Am I seriously offering to tell the war god Huo Wujiu a bedtime story?!

All he could do now was sit and wait for the inevitable rejection so he could backtrack.

But Huo Wujiu said nothing.

He opened his eyes and just…looked at him.

Jiang Suizhou found himself floundering under that gaze.

"I, uh…I'll start, then?" he stammered.

***

The book in Jiang Suizhou's hands was a travelogue.

He'd read plenty of official historical records in the past, but many folk customs and stories had been lost to time or distorted through later retellings, mixed with unofficial histories. Since transmigrating here, he'd developed a keen interest in these "leisure books." He often passed time reading them between official documents and intelligence reports.

Picking up where he'd left off last time, he began reading aloud to Huo Wujiu.

Fortunately, his teaching background served him well. After some initial awkwardness, he gradually became absorbed in the text himself.

His voice was steady and calm—something about his tone when reading seemed to purify his speech, making it exceptionally clear and soothing. It brought a tranquil atmosphere to the room.

Meng Qianshan stood quietly nearby, marveling inwardly.

His Highness really has a way with courtship.

I mean—reading aloud to someone! Who else would think of such an unorthodox method? And for someone of his status to humble himself like this, well…

Even someone with a heart of stone would be moved.

Meng Qianshian couldn't help but sneak a glance at Madam Huo.

The man sat on the bed, eyes closed and silent. His face was still pale, but his furrowed brow had smoothed out…

Just as I thought! It won't be long before I'm helping Madam Huo move back to His Highness's chambers!

Meng Qianshan had to suppress a grin at the thought—and then he realized that a pair of dark eyes was shooting a terrible, icy glare at him.

Huo Wujiu's gaze flicked briefly to Jiang Suizhou, who was too engrossed in reading to notice any of this. The prince's obliviousness confirmed, those piercing eyes snapped back to Meng Qianshan.

The longer he stared, the colder and more hostile his expression became. His brows gradually began knitting themselves back into a frown.

Meng Qianshan was not the sharpest servant employed by the Prince of Jing, but even he understood the message.

You're in the way. Get lost.

Politely taking the hint, Meng Qianshan bowed and then hurried out of the room in silence.

Huo Wujiu watched him leave with a disinterested expression before slowly turning his attention back to the Prince of Jing.

He remained completely focused, utterly unaware of Huo Wujiu's lingering gaze.

His voice was gentle and clear, but not overly loud. It was more on the level of a quiet conversation, though entirely unlike his usual speaking tone.

Huo Wujiu found his breathing unconsciously slowing.

He hadn't expected that a simple travelogue, read in the prince's voice, would prove more effective than any meditation mantra.

The content of the book itself was unremarkable—just the idle writings of a scholar recording his travels. Despite this, the Prince of Jing seemed genuinely engaged with the material, to the point that he didn't even notice how animated his own expressions had become.

A faint smile played at his lips, radiating quiet pleasure.

Huo Wujiu watched for a moment longer before looking away and closing his eyes again.

He'd never liked reading—not just because he couldn't be bothered to try, but because books tended to be about dull things which never held any interest for him.

But when he closed his eyes, the prince's clear voice became a flowing river that carried him through the scholar's accounts of Sichuan and Hunan, sparkling under endless sunlight.

The prince clearly loved these things.

And for some reason, that stirred something unexpected in Huo Wujiu.

He yearned to give everything the Prince of Jing cherished to him.

Like a crude mortal finally enlightened, he'd become a devout worshipper before a god.

And he felt compelled to kneel at the altar and offer up every treasure —those he owned and those he didn't—as tribute.

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Jiang Suizhou stayed until nightfall.

They shared dinner, and then Meng Qianshan returned to his master as he prepared to leave. Seeing how well they'd gotten along, the eunuch seized the opportunity to keep things moving forward.

"Will Your Highness be returning tomorrow?" he asked as he approached the prince with a grin.

Jiang Suizhou hesitated. He cast an uncertain glance at Huo Wujiu.

If he was being honest with himself, he did want to come again. These days, feigning illness kept him housebound with little to do, and Huo Wujiu's treatment was just beginning. He faced an entire month of this pain, according to the doctor.

Jiang Suizhou couldn't help but worry.

Perhaps his previous incessant fear of death at this man's hands had ingrained in him the habit of prioritizing Huo Wujiu's well-being, and he hadn't quite shaken it off yet.

Huo Wujiu looked up to find Jiang Suizhou watching him.

"No need to ask my permission," he said, his voice stiff but quiet.

Meng Qianshan brightened. Before Jiang Suizhou could respond, he chimed in eagerly on his behalf.

"Understood! This servant will arrange to have Your Highness's books and documents moved here at once!"

Jiang Suizhou gave him a sidelong glance, but Meng Qianshan simply beamed.

"This servant was just thinking today that Madam Huo's quarters have better lighting than Your Highness's study," he rambled. "So this works out perfectly. More sunshine will do you good!"

His enthusiasm spared Jiang Suizhou further explanation.

Without objection—effectively granting silent approval—Jiang Suizhou gave a noncommittal hum and left.

Later that evening, a letter from Xu Du arrived in Jiang Suizhou's chambers.

It was more good news—according to the spies they'd planted at Changle Ward, the Ministry of Justice officials had pinpointed the location of the residence. With the target finalized, the raid would happen within days.

The prince and his advisors had long known this was coming. After Chen Ti's successful maneuver inviting Huo Wujiu to the flower-viewing banquet, the emperor had rewarded his efforts by assigning him a lucrative post in Suzhou.

Currently, there was only one resident of the manor—the mistress he kept. In the next few days, she'd be dragged before the emperor.

Jiang Suizhou finished reading, then chuckled.

According to historical records, Chen Ti harbored his own schemes beneath his fawning loyalty to Pang Shao.

And Pang Shao's greed spared no one, not even his most devoted subordinates, which was why Chen Ti had kept this property secret from him.

Once the Ministry of Justice seized it, the mansion and courtesan would be attributed to Jiang Suizhou.

Because of the connection to Jiang Suizhou, the emperor would investigate, and the case would escalate.

And then…Jiang Suizhou only had to sit back and watch as their spear met their own shield.

As he anticipated the spectacle, Jiang Suizhou's mood lifted. He tucked the letter away, faint amusement still lingering on his features.

Meng Qianshan, sneaking glances at him as he quietly read the letter, could only make assumptions as to why.

Since when did His Highness look so unguarded handling official business? Why would he smile at confidential letters?

What could possibly be funny in urgent reports? He must've gotten distracted thinking of Madam Huo.

Exiting the bedchamber, Meng Qianshan stole another look at his master's smile—and couldn't stop himself from grinning a little as well.

It was a grin full of…implications.

Chapter 47

WITHIN TWO DAYS, the news hit the court.

The embezzlement scandal involving Ministry of Rites funds for the emperor's birthday banquet had already fomented much chaos. Then, out of nowhere, the Ministry of Justice uncovered a lead: The stolen silver had been traced to a lavish estate owned by a court official.

The emperor immediately ordered it seized.

The unexpected nature of the raid allowed it to proceed smoothly. The Ministry of Justice confiscated staggering amounts of gold, silver, antiques—and a courtesan kept on the premises.

Oddly, the emperor showed little interest in the money. It was the woman who captivated him. He demanded an investigation into her background, along with that of the property's true owner.

The findings stunned the court. The Ministry of Justice found that the deed was under the name of the courtesan, but the woman herself had been purchased by Chen Ti.

The very official who'd first exposed Ji You's embezzlement.

No one had seen that coming.

For reasons unclear to most, the emperor was furious. He berated the Ministry of Justice, then ordered that Chen Ti be severely punished.

Keeping a courtesan wasn't illegal, so no formal charges could be made regarding that. However, her presence served as proof that the residence and all the gold and silver within belonged to him.

It was all more or less par for the course in the Southern Jing court—these days, few officials were free of corruption, and the sum of embezzled funds in this case was hardly noteworthy. But the laws of Jing were clear that once an official was caught, his sentencing must strictly adhere to legal statutes.

Within days, Chen Ti was convicted, sending shock waves through the officialdom that rippled for a long while.

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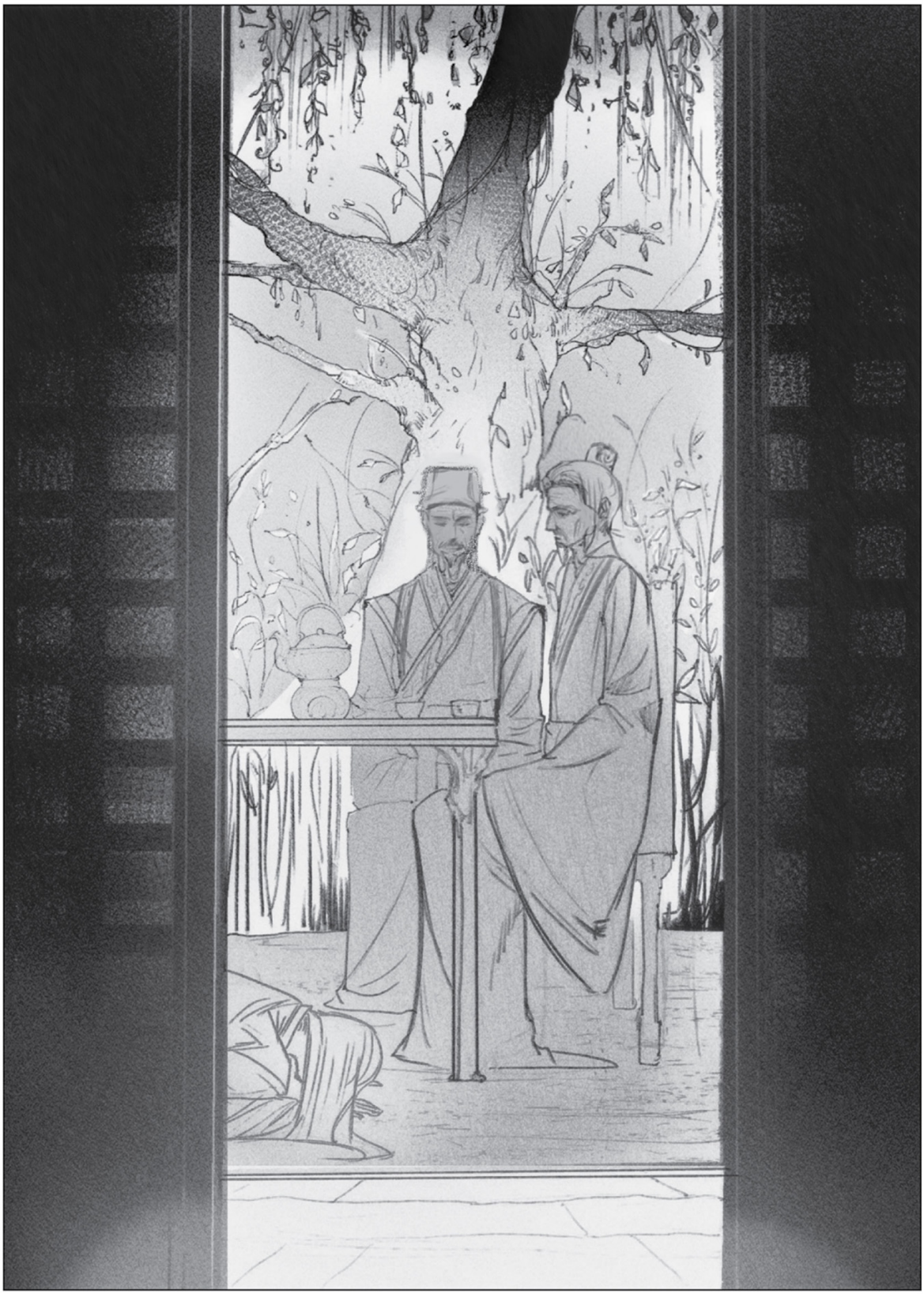
At the Pang estate, the peach blossoms were in full bloom. They painted the entire garden in vibrant hues, but Pang Shao's own courtyard was instead dyed in a palette of serene, fresh shades of green.

These were the green calyx plum blossoms from She County, Huizhou; a tribute the late emperor had so adored that for decades, the palace received annual shipments of them.

Given the challenges of climate and transport, fewer than a hundred plants made it to the capital each year. Even the current emperor's palace had only a handful planted outside, yet they blanketed Pang Shao's courtyard like a misty cloud.

A teapot simmered over a small stove before Pang Shao. Two court officials were present—one sat respectfully to his side, while another trembled on his knees in abject terror.

That kneeling man, too afraid to lift his head, was the very official from the Ministry of Justice who'd investigated Jiang Suizhou's residence.



Pang Shao lifted the teapot lid, peering leisurely into the steam. “What exactly did the Prince of Jing tell you that day?”

“Please, Grand Chancellor, you must believe me!” the official whimpered. “I questioned His Highness exactly as instructed—every word is recorded in the documents! I wouldn’t dare lie!”

Pang Shao smiled faintly.

“And the mansion?”

“It was his concubine who revealed it!”

The teapot lid stilled in Pang Shao’s hand.

“He told you this himself?” His tone took on a peculiar pitch.

“No! I—I overheard it! His concubine was complaining to a maid that the Prince of Jing was keeping a mistress in Changle Ward. He even bought a house for them… I thought it crucial to report to His Majesty—”

His voice shook more and more violently until Pang Shao chuckled.

“No need to be so nervous, Lord Zhang. It’s a simple question.”

The official trembled in silence.

“Well then.” Pang Shao returned the lid to the teapot. “My tea’s about ready. I won’t keep you. You may leave.”

Fumbling, the man scrambled to his feet.

Just as he bowed to take his leave, Pang Shao spoke again.

“However, Lord Zhang…”

“Y-yes, Grand Chancellor?”

Pang Shao lifted the teapot from the stove. Flames leaped beneath it, pulsing with a red glow.

“When people err,” he mused, pouring tea without looking up, “they must pay the price. And if they don’t pay willingly…they can only blame themselves when others come to collect it twofold.”

He set the pot down and gazed placidly into the man’s eyes, the shadow of a smile on his face.

The officer froze up, then bowed repeatedly. “Thank you, Grand Chancellor! Thank you!”

Pang Shao sipped his tea and lazily waved him away.

The official left.

Once the man had fled, Pang Shao exhaled over the steaming cup.

“Hangzhou’s Dragon Well tea. It truly is clearer than the tea from Yecheng.”

He offered the pot to the remaining official. “Care to try?”

That official was the one who’d inventoried Chen Ti’s seized assets.

The man hastily accepted the pot—no one would dare let Pang Shao serve him, after all—and extinguished the stove.

“Are you just going to let him go, Grand Chancellor?”

“Mm,” intoned Pang Shao. “And what would punishing him achieve? It wasn’t his fault to begin with.”

He smiled gently. His expression seemed benevolent, but the official beside him understood the unspoken meaning.

Pang Shao had been crossed by several of his own faction members before they’d joined him. After uncovering their secrets, he’d graciously spared their lives and absorbed them into his inner ranks, where he forced them to work twice as hard so he could reap twice the benefits.

In other words, keeping such men alive yielded far greater returns than killing them.

“The Grand Chancellor has always been magnanimous,” the official said with a knowing chuckle, careful in his flattery. “You’re truly very wise.”

Pang Shao sipped his tea without comment.

“What about…Lord Chen?” the official ventured.

Pang Shao looked at him, and the official bristled with indignation.

“This must be the Prince of Jing’s revenge against Lord Chen! Grand Chancellor, surely we can’t let his vile plan succeed?”

Pang Shao shook his head, sighing as he gazed at the plum blossoms outside, which thronged like mist.

“His Majesty has already decreed it. Who am I to defy imperial orders?”

His sigh was light and indifferent, as if he’d just glanced up to see a bird drop dead mid-flight—unfortunate, but not particularly tragic.

“Pity about Chen Ti.”

The official promptly fell silent.

Everyone knew who truly held power in court. It wasn’t the emperor but Minister Pang.

There was no edict Pang Shao couldn’t alter, only those he chose not to.

This visit had been about feeling out Pang Shao’s stance on Chen Ti’s case. Now he understood.

Pang Shao had never valued Chen Ti; he'd only used him as a disposable hound. But Chen Ti had overstepped twice. First, he'd curried favor with the emperor behind Pang Shao's back, an act already testing Pang Shao's tolerance. Then, he'd been caught hoarding a sizable sum of riches he'd concealed—even from Pang Shao. Should the emperor spare him, Pang Shao wouldn't.

The official sighed inwardly.

Chen Ti's greed had blinded him, and he'd spent all his time ignorant of the world.

Who in this court didn't survive by Pang Shao's grace? No kind fate would await anyone who schemed behind his back.

So for this official, his path forward was very clear: To please Pang Shao, he would kick Chen Ti while he was down and before his demise. Then, as the confiscated treasures made their way to the imperial vaults, he would skim off 20 or 30 percent and divert them to Minister Pang's residence.

The official silently plotted away.

But then, Pang Shao murmured something to himself.

"Who'd have thought…even a caged, beaten dog can still dream of biting."

The official didn't understand, and of course Pang Shao didn't explain.

"Fascinating," he remarked, sipping tea to veil the sharpness in his eyes.

***

Jiang Suizhou knew exactly how much Pang Shao must have hated him right now.

Though Chen Ti wasn't a high-ranking official and had his own side schemes, he was still a member of Pang Shao's faction—and his distant relative to boot. Even if he never valued him, disposing of Chen Ti was still an open provocation to Pang Shao.

He'd landed a hit on Pang Shao; though ultimately painless, it was deeply humiliating.

That said, Jiang Suizhou's mood wasn't dampened in the slightest. He'd long disliked Chen Ti anyway, and now he'd managed to eliminate him and save Ji You in one fell swoop. Truly, a perfect two-for-one deal.

As for Pang Shao's inevitable retaliation…

Well, Pang Shao would come after him regardless of what he did. Might as well fight back and make him suffer a little.

Jiang Suizhou was in such high spirits after receiving the news that Huo Wujiu noticed it the moment he sat down by his bedside.

"How are you today?" Jiang Suizhou asked first.

Huo Wujiu's complexion was still ashen, and the veins on his hands stood out starkly, but his expression was composed. He even managed to spare a glance at Jiang Suizhou.

Jiang Suizhou caught his gaze, eyes bright as he waited expectantly for him to ask what was going on.

After all, in this entire world, there weren't many he could truly talk to—and but a precious handful with whom he could share his joy.

Huo Wujiu was one of these select few.

Yet he merely paused, then deliberately looked away.

"I'm fine," he said flatly.

And then silence.

Stunned, Jiang Suizhou felt the words lodge in his throat, stuck and suffocating.

Why wasn't he asking? How could he not ask?!

As Jiang Suizhou fretted, Huo Wujiu quietly smirked to himself.

The prince might as well have written *"I have good news to share!"* across his forehead. His eagerness was so palpable that Huo Wujiu was powerless to resist the urge to tease him.

He'd maintained his indifferent facade, as if he couldn't see Jiang Suizhou's mounting agitation and restlessness.

Though Jiang Suizhou accepted the book Meng Qianshan handed him, he merely flipped it back and forth without actually opening it.

As he continued to fidget, those dark, gleaming eyes darted toward Huo Wujiu several times.

Even Huo Wujiu's mischievous resolve softened at the pitiable sight.

"What is it?" he relented.

Sure enough, those eyes lit up instantly.

The agony in Huo Wujiu's legs—originally so excruciating he'd wanted to kill someone—suddenly felt distant.

Jiang Suizhou adopted a dignified air, trying and failing to mask his pride. Quite like a cat casually preening for praise.

“I saved Ji You,” he announced.

Huo Wujiu nodded. “That’s good news.”

Then Jiang Suizhou added, “Chen Ti was executed.”

“Mm.” It took only a moment for Huo Wujiu to connect the dots. “You redirected the blame?”

Jiang Suizhou nodded.

He stared fixedly at Huo Wujiu, obviously eagerly awaiting validation. After a pause, Huo Wujiu couldn’t resist obliging.

“A clever scheme.”

“It was *Chen Ti*,” he repeated with emphasis.

Huo Wujiu was momentarily confused. “And…?”

Jiang Suizhou sighed and gave him a pointed look, as if it were obvious.

“Chen Ti! Don’t you remember?” he blurted out. “The one who invited you to that flower-viewing banquet to humiliate you.”

He paused to allow a faint smile to curl his lips. “I redirected the blame onto him.”

It was then that understanding dawned on Huo Wujiu, and he froze.

The prince wasn’t excited to inform him that he’d saved the Minister of Rites.

He was telling Huo Wujiu that he’d avenged him.

Chapter 48

UNFORTUNATELY, JIANG SUIZHOU'S good mood didn't last long.

After Chen Ti's conviction, Qi Min's relentless petitions annoyed the emperor so much that he punished several of Chen Ti's allies in the Ministry of Rites as well. Though their sentences weren't as severe, they were all demoted.

Unexpectedly, Ji You was among them.

Although the case should have ended with Chen Ti, with no further connection to Ji You, two days after his release from prison, he was demoted for "negligence in governance" and reassigned to Huizhou.

It wasn't too far or remote like Lingnan, but for an official of Ji You's age, being transferred out of the capital would effectively mark the end of his career.

Ji You had already been cleared of wrongdoing; this was clearly Pang Shao's petty retaliation. It also served as a warning to Jiang Suizhou that regardless of his actions, ultimately none of his allies could escape unscathed.

The realization lodged like a stone in Jiang Suizhou's chest.

For two days, he avoided Huo Wujiu and holed up in his study. He gathered together rare books from the original prince's substantial collection and, along with some silver notes for travel expenses, sent Meng Qianshan to deliver them to Ji You as a parting gift.

Meng Qianshan returned quickly.

Ji You had graciously accepted the books but refused the money.

“Your Highness,” Meng Qianshan reported, “Lord Ji said his travel funds are sufficient and declined your generosity.”

Then he produced a thin letter and handed it over. “He also wrote a few words for you.”

Jiang Suizhou unfolded it.

The handwriting was bold and unrestrained:

Thank you for all of your help, Your Highness. Please do not blame yourself. Huizhou’s scenery is delightful, and its plum blossoms renowned. This is a place I’ve longed to see. If I depart soon, I might even catch the green plums before they fade. Is that not a great joy?

Jiang Suizhou’s lips finally relaxed into a small smile.

Pang Shao, imposing his own values, had exacted the worst punishment he could imagine—ruining Ji You’s career prospects. But everyone had their own inclinations and pursuits in life, and it was foolish to assume that career and wealth were universal desires.

His “punishment” meant nothing to Ji You in the end. For Jiang Suizhou, that was a silver lining.

Still…

He studied the letter a moment longer before carefully tucking it away.

Even if Ji You was unharmed—even if he ended up enjoying his exile—the fact remained that Pang Shao’s intent was malicious. He had to answer for that.

Jiang Suizhou would make sure to settle this account.

But at the moment, Pang Shao held unrivaled dominance over the imperial court—especially over the Ministry of Personnel, which oversaw official appointments and transfers. Practically all of it was within his grasp.

Opposing him would be a nearly impossible task.

***

Huo Wujiu hadn’t caught sight of Jiang Suizhou for two full days.

He had to stay in his room after taking his medicine each day. Sometimes he’d look out the window to see people coming and going elsewhere, but the excruciating pain meant he couldn’t go outside himself.

In fact, the pain in his legs only seemed to be getting worse these past two days. It affected his mood so badly that he couldn’t calm himself down, no matter how many times he recited his mental mantras.

It was only two days, but those two days felt longer than usual.

On the third day, while Li Changning was administering acupuncture as usual, Huo Wujiu reached his limit.

“Did you change the medicine at all recently?” he asked suddenly.

Li Changning froze. “Of course not!”

Huo Wujiu frowned at his answer. He massaged his forehead briefly, then gave a noncommittal grunt.

“Has the general noticed anything different?” Li Changning inquired worriedly.

Huo Wujiu paused. “No. Just asking.”

Li Changning nodded and continued applying the needles in silence. However, Wei Kai noticed Huo Wujiu's expression and quickly approached the bed.

"Is something wrong, General?"

Huo Wujiu hesitated.

"Has there been any unusual activity in the residence these past two days?" he asked carefully.

Wei Kai thought for a moment.

"This subordinate hasn't heard anything. But when I arrived here with Physician Li this morning, that eunuch at the Prince of Jing's side warned me to be careful."

Huo Wujiu's gaze sharpened. "What did he say?"

Wei Kai blinked, mildly startled. Somehow, it felt like the general's speech suddenly gained urgency after he heard those words.

"Nothing much. Just that the Prince of Jing has been in a bad mood these two days and told me not to provoke him."

Huo Wujiu looked away.

Then something *had* happened.

He asked no further questions, and the two men wisely busied themselves with their tasks. Only after they finished administering their treatments and withdrew did Huo Wujiu gaze out the window, his brow deeply furrowed.

The prince had been fine two days ago. What could have angered him?

An unusual restlessness took root in Huo Wujiu’s chest as he began speculating.

Court matters? But the Prince of Jing hadn’t left the residence over the past two days, either. Nor had any officials come to visit him.

Huo Wujiu’s frown lasted the rest of the day.

Fortunately, as night fell, Jiang Suizhou arrived.

By then, Huo Wujiu had already finished dinner and was sitting on the bed, ostensibly reading a book but clearly distracted.

“How have you been these two days?” Jiang Suizhou asked as he took his seat beside the bed.

Huo Wujiu set the book down. Instead of answering, he countered with a question of his own.

“What happened?”

Jiang Suizhou was taken aback.

He hadn’t expected any hint of this news to reach Huo Wujiu’s ears, nor for him to inquire so naturally, as if it were obvious.

When Jiang Suizhou didn’t respond immediately, Huo Wujiu spoke again.

“I heard you’ve been upset these two days.”

A strange warmth bloomed in Jiang Suizhou’s chest.

He had indeed been irritable ever since he learned of Ji You’s demotion. Those around him tiptoed carefully around the subject. As his subordinates, they dared not provoke him or ask unnecessary questions.

Naturally, this meant he had no one to talk to, much less confide in.

Although Jiang Suizhou didn’t consider himself a particularly sensitive person, bottling up these emotions without an outlet left him stifled.

Truthfully, he’d never imagined that he could share this with Huo Wujiu, nor that he would even care to ask.

“Minister Ji from the Ministry of Rites has been demoted and will soon depart for Huizhou,” he answered finally, his voice uneven.

Huo Wujiu frowned. “Weren’t his charges cleared?”

“He was charged with additional negligence. After Chen Ti’s arrest, the matter was handed entirely to the Ministries of Justice and Personnel. I couldn’t intervene.”

A thoughtful silence briefly settled over the room.

“So it was Pang Shao’s orders,” Huo Wujiu stated flatly.

Jiang Suizhou gave a wry laugh before exhaling slowly. “That’s right. Having lost to me, he sought to vent his frustration. Minister Ji was merely collateral damage.”

“Any court official must accept such risks,” Huo Wujiu said gently. “A demotion to a nonremote location might even be a blessing in disguise—an opportunity to get away from court intrigues.”

But Jiang Suizhou shook his head.

“That may be how others may think of it, but I cannot.” He paused, then his voice softened as he continued, “Regardless, his misfortune began with me. I can’t just sit on this matter.”

A nearly imperceptible sigh escaped him.

“After all…it’s Pang Shao.”

Huo Wujiu fell silent.

Of course, Jiang Suizhou knew Huo Wujiu was confined to the estate and unable to walk, let alone take action on any of these matters. He hadn't expected solutions; he just needed to ease his heart slightly by voicing his grievances.

He picked up the book Meng Qianshan had set aside.

"Hm…it's been two days. I can't remember exactly where we left off."

Jiang Suizhou was ready to drop the subject and resume reading, but Huo Wujiu wasn't.

Something tightened in his chest as he watched the prince flip through the pages of the book, feigning calmness and composure.

If the Prince of Jing were truly as heartless as the rumors alleged, it wouldn't matter…but he wasn't. He was an exceptionally softhearted man who insisted on taking up all burdens, even if they weren't his to bear. He cared for others even to his own detriment, even when he was on the verge of collapse himself.

He shouldn't have to. Simply because he was born into royalty…

It only took a moment for Jiang Suizhou to find his place in the book. He began reading in that steady, quiet voice—and stopped abruptly as Huo Wujiu snatched the book from his hands.

Jiang Suizhou looked up in surprise.

"I'll do it," Huo Wujiu said.

All Jiang Suizhou could do was stare in stunned silence as Huo Wujiu pulled the lamp closer. His usual cool, detached expression was

subtly tinged with awkward uncertainty.

He didn’t look up, as if clumsily offering comfort without quite knowing how.

Jiang Suizhou’s throat tightened. Heat spread through his chest, as though the pent-up gloom was being burned away.

He could only watch Huo Wujiu silently. Then Huo Wujiu lowered his gaze to the book under the lamplight…and his aloof, strained composure was abruptly swallowed by confusion.

His brows slowly furrowed as he looked back up at Jiang Suizhou.

“This…is what you’ve been reading the past few days?” he asked.

Jiang Suizhou blinked. “Yes…?”

Huo Wujiu’s rigid gaze returned to the book.

Unlike the smooth, plainspoken vernacular Jiang Suizhou had been reciting, the text before him was dense with obscure phrases and archaic characters. It was utterly incomprehensible. Just two lines made his head throb.

Jiang Suizhou leaned over to look.

Of course. In ancient times, written and spoken language differed drastically—and this book in particular was written by a renowned scholar of the previous dynasty. Their flowery, abstruse prose was meticulously crafted and nearly impenetrable for many readers. These sentences couldn’t be read aloud unless the speaker could translate them to common vernacular on the fly.

As a professional in the field, paraphrasing came effortlessly for Jiang Suizhou.

“It’s the same book. I’ve just been rewording some things slightly since the original text is a bit tricky to read aloud,” he explained.

Huo Wujiu said nothing.

Jiang Suizhou studied him, puzzled.

While it was true that he was a soldier, he was still a man from ancient China. Surely he could read this…?

Then…what’s with that expression…?

Before he could figure it out, Huo Wujiu abruptly closed the book and set it aside.

“Pick another. This one bored me days ago—no substance.”

Jiang Suizhou grew even more confused.

But…weren’t you engrossed when I was reading it aloud before?

Chapter 49

FORTUNATELY, JIANG SUIZHOU hadn't been particularly attached to that text. Since Huo Wujiu disliked it, he let it go without probing.

The next day, Li Changning noticed Huo Wujiu seemed better. He was still quite pale but less lethargic than he had been lately. He even gave a slight nod to Li Changning when he arrived in his quarters.

A patient's condition inevitably fluctuated during the course of treatment, so Li Changning thought little of it.

"You look much better today, General," he remarked, smiling. "Has the treatment taken effect?"

Huo Wujiu felt no difference but gave a courteous nod anyway.

Li Changning beamed.

Following that day's treatment, as Li Changning was packing his medical kit to leave, Huo Wujiu gestured for Wei Kai.

"General?" Wei Kai hurried over.

"I have a task for you."

Wei Kai's face lit up with surprised joy. "Please, tell me!"

He and the general were deep in enemy territory, and much of their time was spent simply waiting for the right moment to execute their plans. Working in secret, Wei Kai felt frustrated that aiding in the general's recovery was all he could do.

He ached for the chance to prove his loyalty to the general, and it left him restless and itching for action.

Now, his eyes gleamed with anticipation.

“Are our brothers within the city still standing by?”

Wei Kai nodded eagerly.

“None of us would dare move without the general’s orders. I’ve ordered them to stay hidden in Lin’an. If you have any commands, General, I can reach them right away.”

Huo Wujiu gave a faint hum of acknowledgment.

“Then find ways to make trouble for Pang Shao these next few days.”

Wei Kai froze.

Seriously…? When the general gave orders, he certainly went all out.

He stared blankly at Huo Wujiu, momentarily forgetting to respond.

Huo Wujiu gave him a faint look of disdain.

“Not assassination,” he clarified.

“Th-then…what kind of ‘trouble’ does the general mean?” Wei Kai stammered, blinking rapidly.

“Jiang Shunheng must have him assigned to several tasks,” Huo Wujiu explained calmly. “Make him fail an important one—or two—that will catch the emperor’s attention.”

Wei Kai nodded stiffly.

“Go.”

With those orders, Wei Kai and Li Changning took their leave.

Huo Wujiu gazed impassively out the window.

His current capabilities were limited, but he wasn’t completely powerless. If Pang Shao wanted to make life difficult for Jiang Suizhou,

then he would return the favor.

The battlefield was a vast place, but even the smallest gust of wind could shape the course of war.

That was if one controlled where they blew.

Huo Wujiu turned away and picked up the book from the bedside table.

Frowning, he cracked it open and began to painstakingly decipher its dense text.

Yesterday, he had dismissed this very same book as “boring.”

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Lin’an was no stranger to rain, but the current downpour was unusual enough to instill unease and fear.

It arrived right on the heels of the previous shower, darkening the skies again as soon as they cleared and lasting several days.

Most concerningly, the torrential rains caused the complete collapse of the imperial ancestral temple.

Construction on the temple had only begun two months prior and was far from complete. The relentless storm reduced nearly two months of work to rubble.

This was an ill omen of the gravest kind!

The ancestral temple, situated north of the palace, had been intended to house the spirits of Great Jing’s past emperors. As the very foundation of the dynasty, it was more sacred than the palace itself. After the court’s

southern relocation, the current emperor ambitiously and deliberately oriented the temple to face north. It was meant to symbolize his ancestors laying witness to his eventual reconquest of lost lands—his gaze fixed firmly on Yecheng in particular.

And yet, before Yecheng could be reclaimed, the temple crumbled.

Rumors spread like wildfire among the people, soon reaching a point where it became impossible to suppress them. Whispers circulated that Great Jing's fate was sealed—even children in the streets began chanting rhymes foretelling Jing's fall and Liang's rise.

The emperor flew into a rage, throwing the court into chaos.

However, in stark contrast to this turmoil, an atmosphere of tranquility prevailed within the Prince of Jing's residence.

That day, after his acupuncture session, Huo Wujiu discovered that he'd regained some movement in his legs.

The range of motion was so minimal as to be almost imperceptible, and he couldn't risk putting unnecessary strain on his still-healing wounds, but it was proof that the treatment was working. The room fell silent as everyone present held their breath in quiet joy.

Only Huo Wujiu remained composed. As he tested his mobility, he ventured a casual question for Wei Kai.

"The ancestral temple. That was your doing?"

"Yes!" Wei Kai grinned. "The general said to cause trouble that would reach that bastard emperor, right? Our brothers scouted the city and found that Pang Shao's biggest project was rebuilding the temple! At first, I wasn't sure, but the squad leader's a clever one, and he swore he could pull it off!"

Huo Wujiu glanced up, the corners of his eyes crinkling with rare approval. “Quite bold.”

Wei Kai knew his general seldom smiled. He must’ve been thoroughly pleased.

“Pang Shao’s the bold one—skimming funds even from the ancestral temple! The walls were hollow, the materials shoddy. Our men just helped things along. All it took was a *little* sabotage after infiltrating the laborers, and the rain did the rest!”

“Living up north must’ve blinded Minister Pang to southern rains, for him to dare cut corners during construction,” Li Changning added, chuckling. “Even without interference, that temple wouldn’t have lasted more than a year.”

He and Wei Kai shared a laugh. Though Huo Wujiu nodded with them, he raised his hand a moment later and cut their merriment short.

“Well done, but stay vigilant,” he cautioned. “Monitor the Pang estate for any movements. He won’t take this loss lightly.”

Wei Kai grinned. “Already handled, General!”

Huo Wujiu gave a low grunt of acknowledgment, his gaze drifting to the window.

Outside, Anyin Hall’s main room bustled with activity.

***

Jiang Suizhou received the intelligence report almost immediately.

He’d never expected history to deviate so drastically. Despite the Southern Jing court’s shameless corruption, there were no records of an ancestral temple collapsing due to graft.

It presented an extraordinary opportunity.

Normally, Pang Shao’s discretion allowed him to operate with impunity. He kept his embezzlement hidden from the emperor, flattering him openly while pilfering the coffers behind his back. No matter how much he stole, the emperor remained oblivious.

The temple collapse, however, exposed his misdeeds directly to the emperor, especially as it had been intended to house imperial ancestors’ tablets.

Though Pang Shao hadn’t personally overseen construction, as chief supervisor, the responsibility fell squarely on him. Upon learning of the collapse, the emperor immediately dispatched an investigation team to the construction site. With the flooded ruins of a sacred temple as irrefutable evidence, not even Pang Shao’s vast influence could obscure the truth or shift the blame.

This marked Pang Shao’s first failure before the emperor since his reign began, and Jiang Shunheng’s wrath was predictably monumental.

Several members from the Pang faction were dismissed and investigated in short order. Most critically, the absolute trust the emperor held in Pang Shao had been seriously fractured. Previously, the emperor had delegated all court affairs to him, whether major or minor, but now that reliance had a crack in it.

This outcome delighted Jiang Suizhou beyond measure.

He combed through the report multiple times, wondering if it was the heavens themselves who'd summoned that storm. On his last reread before putting away the document, an easily overlooked detail caught his eye.

With so many members of the Pang faction ousted from their positions, the Ministry of Personnel had significant vacancies to fill. Typically, the emperor would have delegated this kind of task to Pang Shao, but with Pang Shao implicated as well, he had no idea what to do.

Thus he turned instead to Qi Min, who recommended promoting young scholars unaffiliated with any faction. In other words, recent examination graduates.

Jiang Suizhou's brow furrowed.

He knew Qi Min acted not in self-interest, but solely for the dynasty's stability. However, his blunt temperament and seniority made his methods uncompromising.

Qi Min had long opposed Pang Shao openly yet ineffectively, due to the latter's dominance. Now, with the recent blows to the Pang faction ever since Chen Ti's downfall, Qi Min had gained unexpected leverage.

Jiang Suizhou traced the letter's edge contemplatively.

Ironically, Qi Min had been shielded by his failures until now. Previously, Pang Shao had dismissed him as harmless—someone who was all bark and no bite.

But now Qi Min found himself finally in the position to bare his teeth.

Even as a revered elder serving three reigns, he'd drawn Pang Shao's lethal attention by choosing to kick him while he was down.

There was a reason the historical records noted Qi Min's unnatural death.

In the version of history that Jiang Suizhou knew, just before Southern Jing's fall, Qi Min was discovered to be corresponding with Northern Liang, resulting in the eradication of him and his family. Of course, the veracity of the "evidence" being unconfirmed, historians long debated his actual guilt.

If that was the truth, then it didn't matter. But…what if it had been fabricated, after all?

Either way, this event might now occur prematurely, all because somewhere, a butterfly flapped its wings.

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When Jiang Suizhou arrived at Huo Wujiu's quarters at dusk, he found the man reading alone on the bed.

It seemed Huo Wujiu no longer necessarily needed his daily company, and yet neither of them acknowledged it. As if they'd silently agreed to maintain this routine, they quite casually and naturally spent time together each day.

Huo Wujiu glanced up as Jiang Suizhou sat by the bed.

"Good news?" he asked.

"Indeed," replied Jiang Suizhou, a faint smile playing on his lips.

He picked up the book beside the bed and flipped through it idly as he continued.

“Heard about the ancestral temple north of the palace?” he asked lightly. “It collapsed because of the heavy rain.”

He arched a brow meaningfully at Huo Wujiu. His delight was so overt that Huo Wujiu felt compelled to give him a gentle reminder.

“That’s your family’s temple. The ancestors enshrined there are yours too.”

Jiang Suizhou waved it off.

“It was only half built—no tablets moved in yet.” He smirked. “Besides, Pang Shao caused this. If the founding emperors seek vengeance, they’ll haunt him, not the one reveling in his misfortune.”

Huo Wujiu paused.

Technically, it wasn’t Pang Shao who’d caused this. At its core, Huo Wujiu was responsible.

But at this point, he’d waged war against the Jiang clan’s dynasty for long enough—what was one more desecrated ancestral temple added to the tally?

Just then, Jiang Suizhou’s amused voice cut through Huo Wujiu’s thoughts once more.

“You know, since you’ve married into my household, you’re on my family register now. By that logic, this grievance against Pang Shao is yours as well, is it not?”

Chapter 50

THE MOMENT THE WORDS left his mouth, Jiang Suizhou's stomach dropped in fear.

It had just slipped out without thought. How could he joke like that with Huo Wujiu? Perhaps he'd been lulled into complacence by the peaceful atmosphere and by how strangely amiable Huo Wujiu had been acting toward him as of late.

Outwardly, his smile remained composed. Inwardly, he tensed, peeking at Huo Wujiu over the book's edge.

Sitting perfectly still on the bed, Huo Wujiu leveled his gaze at Jiang Suizhou. Those dark eyes were as calm and impassive as ever, the brows above them relaxed. There was no trace of anger.

Then, unexpectedly, his mouth twitched into a lopsided little smirk.

"Quite the blood feud," he remarked.

It was a casual, seemingly offhand comment, but Jiang Suizhou sensed there was something more beneath those words that he couldn't quite decipher.

But he didn't have the mind to dwell on it.

Right now, staring dumbfounded at Huo Wujiu, all he could think about was how strikingly handsome the man looked when he smiled.

***

After that, Jiang Suizhou kept a close watch on the court's movements.

Xu Du had dispatched nearly half of his elite guards already, which left ten or so remaining in the capital. The continuous stream of intelligence from these men, combined with reports from court officials, formed the entirety of his current information network.

He scrutinized each word of every message, committing them to memory, trying to discern Pang Shao's intentions.

Within days, he discovered an official who, seemingly out of nowhere, had connected with Pang Shao. This official wasn't part of Pang Shao's faction and had few prior dealings with him, yet their interactions grew suddenly and unusually frequent.

However, Pang Shao's extreme caution prevented Jiang Suizhou's men from identifying the official involved. Their secret meetings and exchanges left no trace.

At a loss, Jiang Suizhou was forced to turn to the knowledge he'd retained of this historical period, but he came up empty.

During this time, Pang Shao had framed multiple officials, with numerous accomplices involved. After much deliberation, Jiang Suizhou still couldn't pinpoint Pang Shao's exact scheme.

So that day, he summoned Gu Changyun to his chambers.

Though not as steady and dependable as Xu Du, Gu Changyun was sharp-witted and possessed an eidetic memory. He remembered every piece of information the original Prince of Jing had received before Jiang Suizhou's transmigration.

When Gu Changyun arrived, Jiang Suizhou swiftly dismissed all of his servants. Once they were the only two people in the room, he laid out the compiled intelligence to analyze with Gu Changyun.

The information was complex and voluminous, making the task far from easy.

Having been expelled from Jiang Suizhou's room early that morning, Meng Qianshan idled under the corridor eaves from dawn until noon. By then, Li Changning had finished Huo Wujiu's acupuncture session and emerged with Wei Kai, medical kit in hand.

As he had nothing better to do, Meng Qianshan impulsively decided to see them off.

But to his surprise, the two approached him first.

"Why are you waiting outside, Qianshan-gonggong?" Li Changning asked pleasantly.

"His Highness has company, so he ordered all the servants to wait out here," Meng Qianshan explained with a polite smile.

"Ah, well, Madam Huo noticed you just now," Li Changning replied, giving a little nod. "He seemed to have questions, since he asked me to fetch you on my way out."

Meng Qianshan's heart skipped a beat.

Madam Huo had summoned him…while the prince was with Madam Gu…?

A chill ran down his spine. Nothing good would come of this.

He forced a smile and hurried to Huo Wujiu's quarters.

The recent rains had left the skies overcast, casting the room in dim light. Huo Wujiu reclined against the bedframe, blankets draped loosely over his lap. Though he idly flipped through a book, he clearly wasn't reading it.

Meng Qianshan hastily bowed.

"Madam Huo, you wished to see this servant?" Meng Qianshan smiled nervously.

Huo Wujiu didn't look up. "Why were you standing in the courtyard?"

Though his tone was calm, it carried an icy edge much sharper than usual. It was enough to make Meng Qianshan tremble.

"His Highness is receiving a guest," he answered evasively, "so this servant stepped out for air."

Huo Wujiu's fingers stilled on the book's pages.

He'd seen it earlier—Gu Changyun's arrival, Jiang Suizhou dismissing all attendants.

All through his treatment this morning, his thoughts kept dragging him toward the main wing of Anyin Hall like some invisible force tugging at his soul. Not even the sting of the needles being inserted was enough to register over the agitation that clouded his mind.

Unbearable as it was, its source eluded him.

After all, he knew now that the Prince of Jing harbored no special feelings for him. It had all been a misunderstanding from the very beginning. And besides, the prince had *actual* concubines besides him. He was one in name only.

These were established facts, yet dwelling on them caused the caged and furious beast within his chest to stir.

Huo Wujiu remained silent. Beside him, Meng Qianshan broke into a cold sweat.

Finally, the eunuch came clean.

“His Highness summoned Madam Gu this morning… Likely to discuss household matters…”

Huo Wujiu recognized the deception. Household matters didn’t require dismissing all servants.

But he could find no outlet for the anger and frustration that threatened to suffocate him.

He paused.

“Mm. You can leave,” he finally said.

Meng Qianshan hadn’t expected such an easy dismissal. He nearly wept with relief, bowing repeatedly as he fled the room.

Behind him, Huo Wujiu’s attention had already shifted.

Through the window, beneath overcast skies, that tightly shut door held his gaze.

He felt as if he’d fallen into an enemy’s trap.

Surrounded from all sides and ensnared, with nowhere to escape.

***

With Gu Changyun’s assistance, Jiang Suizhou narrowed down the possibilities enough to conclude with reasonable certainty that Pang Shao’s next target was Qi Min.

The only reason Pang Shao had tolerated Qi Min’s presence for so long was that he posed no threat, but this revered elder official had now become a liability. As such, this ancient, towering tree would be uprooted completely for his transgression against Pang Shao.

Ultimately, this had nothing to do with Jiang Suizhou. If he intervened, he would simply be meddling in others’ affairs.

But meddle he must—whether for Pang Shao’s sake, Qi Min’s, or his own.

However, historical records remained ambiguous about whether Qi Min had truly collaborated with Northern Liang. Jiang Suizhou had no way of knowing if Qi Min currently had vulnerabilities Pang Shao could exploit—or if someone was framing him, and who that someone might be.

The entire day passed without any breakthroughs. Only when the sunlight faded and Meng Qianshan came to light the lamps did Jiang Suizhou suddenly realize his body ached all over, and his head felt heavy and muddled.

Time to rest.

He looked around his empty chambers and stood.

“Your Highness?” Meng Qianshan hurried forward.

“I’m going to see Madam Huo,” Jiang Suizhou said.

The decision came so naturally that he didn’t notice the delighted smile instantly spreading across Meng Qianshan’s face. He walked out,

following the corridor to Huo Wujiu's door.

A maid hurried to announce his arrival just as Huo Wujiu happened to be having dinner. By the time Jiang Suizhou entered the room, there was already an extra set of chopsticks set out for him.

The moment he sat down at the table, Jiang Suizhou felt the stagnant energy in his body begin to dissipate.

Even so, when Huo Wujiu looked up, he saw the lingering furrow between Jiang Suizhou's brows.

He paused.

Never before in his life had he found himself so irritated by someone, yet still so utterly helpless against them.

Though Huo Wujiu had been in a terrible mood all day, now that he was face-to-face with the very source of his annoyance, all he could see was the person himself. The emotions that had built up over the entire day were instantly overshadowed by the weariness and exhaustion on that face.

In his dark eyes lingered no negative emotion; they held only Jiang Suizhou.

After a moment of silence, Huo Wujiu couldn't help but speak.

"Trouble?" he asked.

The question came just as Jiang Suizhou picked up his chopsticks, and he paused.

There was no practical use in discussing this with Huo Wujiu, yet he found himself desperately wanting to. The question loosened something in him, and he soon realized it felt impossible to hold back.

After all, being with Huo Wujiu made him feel like a weary bird returning to its nest.

He set down his bowl and waved a hand, signaling to Meng Qianshan. The eunuch understood immediately, and he swiftly ushered out all the servants before stepping out himself.

Once the door closed behind them, Jiang Suizhou idly picked up a bite of food.

“Tell me,” he began slowly, “if Pang Shao wanted to vent his anger on someone for the temple collapse, who would be the easiest target?”

“The Grand Master of Ceremonies,” Huo Wujiu answered without hesitation.

Jiang Suizhou froze, chopsticks suspended in midair as he stared at Huo Wujiu.

The Grand Master of Ceremonies was Qi Min. How had Huo Wujiu reached the same conclusion so quickly? It’d taken Jiang Suizhou days to piece that together.

“Pang Shao committed a grave offense. Even if he avoids punishment, some of his faction will fall,” Huo Wujiu explained, easily meeting the prince’s gaze. “Qi Min is the second most influential person in your court. He’s also clashed with Pang Shao for years, and recent events mean he’ll naturally gain the upper hand. Pang Shao won’t just sit back and watch.”

Jiang Suizhou couldn’t help but admire his analytical abilities.

Huo Wujiu understood Southern Jing’s political landscape so effortlessly—no wonder he had been undefeated in battle. That level of insight was rare even among seasoned generals.

“Exactly my thoughts. But Pang Shao is cautious. He hasn’t revealed his plans,” Jiang Suizhou remarked, nodding.

“He’s collaborating with the enemy,” Huo Wujiu speculated. “It’s the fastest and surest way to destroy Qi Min.”

Jiang Suizhou stiffened, then slowly set down his chopsticks.

Their thoughts aligned, but Jiang Suizhou had historical records to guide him. How had Huo Wujiu deduced this?

He studied Huo Wujiu intently.

Huo Wujiu, meanwhile, found his scrutiny uncomfortable.

His only real source of information was Wei Kai, who had reported the past few days of surveillance; that was all it was. Though they hadn’t uncovered Pang Shao’s exact plans, he could still piece together the big picture.

Huo Wujiu cleared his throat awkwardly and continued speaking.

“I can tell you this much, at least—Qi Min opposes Pang Shao, but he has never contacted us. If he’s accused of treason, it’s a frame-up.”

“That would require evidence,” Jiang Suizhou murmured. “Someone close to Qi Min would have to plant it—someone he trusts…”

His eyes gradually brightened.

“I’ll have someone investigate potential suspects right away. The mystery official who’s been secretly meeting Pang Shao must be connected __”

Huo Wujiu let him talk before he deftly twirled his chopsticks around and tapped Jiang Suizhou’s forehead.

“Investigate his student—the one who came in third in the imperial exams a decade ago.”

Jiang Suizhou gaped. “You know even that?”

Naturally. In fact, Wei Kai had uncovered it just yesterday and reported it to Huo Wujiu earlier.

Huo Wujiu paused, then swallowed down the truth.

“Of course I do,” he said flatly. “You say you’ve been investigating for days, yet you missed this? Focus on your work properly and stop wasting your time frolicking with concubines in broad daylight.”

Chapter 51

FROLICKING WITH— What?!

Stunned speechless, Jiang Suizhou gaped at Huo Wujiu for a long time before he realized what in the world he was talking about.

Then he burst out laughing.

“It’s not what you think,” he said immediately.

Huo Wujiu frowned. “What?”

Jiang Suizhou brought the teacup to his lips, then paused and met Huo Wujiu’s gaze.

No one besides the prince and the two concubines in question knew the true nature of their relationship. Not even Meng Qianshan had the faintest idea.

Logically, the fewer people who knew, the better. He had already confided quite a lot in Huo Wujiu, but there was no need to disclose this to him as well. It would only complicate things.

However, though Jiang Suizhou considered himself a rational man, he felt his rationality instantly short-circuit under Huo Wujiu’s piercing gaze.

“Those two are simply advisors I keep in the residence,” he blurted out.

Only after speaking did he realize the gravity of what he’d done. He’d clearly lost his mind briefly.

Regret flooded his thoughts, but there was nothing to be done about it now. Words spoken couldn't be taken back.

Jiang Suizhou tried to comfort himself with resignation—what was done was done. After all, they were grasshoppers tied to the same string now. Huo Wujiu already knew of his fraught relationship with the emperor. What harm could one more secret do?

Steeling himself, he continued, "Actually, I presented myself as a cut-sleeve to throw off the emperor. It was always a cover—those two are concubines in name only. When I summoned Gu Changyun earlier, it was to discuss Pang Shao."

As he finished his explanation and awaited Huo Wujiu's reaction, Jiang Suizhou couldn't stop his lips from curving into a small smile despite himself.

Surely he'd be moved by his sincerity? If he could share even this monumental secret, his commitment to their alliance should be undeniable.

But even after an agonizingly long silence, Huo Wujiu said nothing.

Jiang Suizhou looked up, puzzled.

Huo Wujiu simply picked up his chopsticks and resumed eating.

"B-but…you…" Jiang Suizhou trailed off helplessly.

Huo Wujiu deigned to give him another brief glance before lowering his eyes again.

"Mm," he intoned faintly. "I see. But this has nothing to do with me."

Jiang Suizhou gritted his teeth indignantly. Classic Huo Wujiu behavior. He should've expected as much.

He grabbed his own chopsticks and continued to eat, blind to Huo Wujiu’s reaction.

The man had, in fact, intentionally kept his head bowed. He very deliberately focused his attention on the bowl in front of him, struggling to suppress the smile that threatened to spread across his lips.

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With a clear target in mind, Jiang Suizhou’s actions became much more focused.

Qi Min’s student, Zhao Dunting, currently held a fairly lucrative midlevel position in the Ministry of Personnel. In contrast to Pang Shao’s heavily guarded residence, Xu Du’s operatives easily infiltrated Zhao Dunting’s household.

They meticulously tracked his daily movements to find—as expected—that his outings coincided precisely with the visits from Pang Shao’s mystery guest.

There was no doubt. It was him.

Jiang Suizhou had to marvel at how deeply this man had managed to hide himself. Somehow, he remained unassociated with the Pang faction even after all key figures had died in the original timeline.

Though not high-ranking, he was quite cunning indeed.

Jiang Suizhou instructed Xu Du to continue the surveillance operation, with the intent of monitoring Zhao Dunting’s meetings with any other suspicious contacts as well.

Sure enough, he corresponded frequently with Qi Min.

Jiang Suizhou found this unsurprising—surviving records about Zhao Dunting were sparse and mostly revolved around Qi Min.

As Qi Min's student, though, Zhao Dunting stood out. Qi Min was a famously upstanding court official who never showed favoritism, not even to close associates. Thus, while Qi Min had many students, he lacked the influence of Pang Shao and established no factions.

During his ten years in court, Zhao Dunting received no support of any kind from Qi Min, and his rank remained low as a result. Despite all of this, he was exceptionally devoted to his mentor, as filial as a son to his father.

He even pleaded for Qi Min's corpse to remain intact after the latter's alleged treason, which finally earned Zhao Dunting widespread respect within the court.

As part of Zhao Dunting's usual reverence, he sent Qi Min medicinal herbs in advance of the frequent rain that heralded spring in Jiangnan, as Qi Min had always suffered joint pain during this sort of weather.

Jiang Suizhou's elite guards intercepted and inspected the medicinal herbs and confirmed they were ordinary—absolutely nothing suspicious mixed in.

After delivering the medicine, Zhao Dunting visited Qi Min every few days. Qi Min's family was long accustomed to it. In particular, his wife treated Zhao Dunting with great kindness and warmth.

Jiang Suizhou bided his time.

He didn't have to wait very long, however, before his spies uncovered several letters of interest, and Xu Du delivered the rubbings to

him for analysis.

Zhao Dunting had retrieved these letters from Pang Shao and left them in his own study, which was where Jiang Suizhou's elite guards uncovered them.

They appeared to be covert correspondence from Northern Liang, containing various detailed inquiries about Southern Jing's court affairs—along with a half-finished response that unmistakably mimicked Qi Min's handwriting.

They'd forged letters from Northern Liang, as well as Qi Min's response.

The forgeries looked alarmingly authentic, complete with seals. Jiang Suizhou turned them over and over in his hands, examining them thoroughly before finally storing them away.

He looked up at Xu Du with a grim expression.

Xu Du studied him briefly. "Should we steal the originals, Your Highness?"

After some consideration, Jiang Suizhou shook his head.

"Without the letters, their plot will fail—this time. But what about their next attempt?" He leveled a thoughtful gaze at Xu Du. "By exposing Zhao Dunting now, we alert Pang Shao. If he replaces him with someone we know nothing about, we'd find ourselves back at square one, or worse, Pang Shao traces it back to us."

Xu Du nodded slowly.

"Your Highness is wise. It's easy for us to infiltrate Zhao Dunting's residence, but Pang Shao cannot know. Stopping Zhao Dunting now only

solves one threat while leaving Minister Qi vulnerable in the long term."

"Mm." Jiang Suizhou took the letter and stared at it thoughtfully.

"Yet if we don't act," Xu Du added, "within days Zhao Dunting will plant these in Minister Qi's home. Once they are discovered, Minister Qi won't be able to clear his name."

Jiang Suizhou nodded.

"So…I've been thinking about how to attain the best of both worlds," he said.

Xu Du pondered his words and suddenly froze.

"Your Highness is saying…" He hesitated.

Jiang Suizhou nodded. "We'll have to take the risk."

***

That morning, Jiang Suizhou and Xu Du deliberated for hours. Once their discussion concluded, Jiang Suizhou carefully secured the evidence and saw Xu Du out.

As they stepped outside, Xu Du suddenly made a noise of surprise.

"Huh…" he murmured.

"What is it?" Jiang Suizhou asked.

Xu Du glanced around. "Where's Changyun?"

"Was Gu Changyun here?" Jiang Suizhou asked, puzzled.

Xu Du nodded. Now outside with servants nearby, he adjusted his speech to more formally address the prince.

“Your Highness, Changyun came with me this morning. When I said I’d meet you alone, he threw a tantrum and insisted on waiting right here.”

On the one hand, Jiang Suizhou found himself rendered momentarily speechless by Gu Changyun’s dramatics. On the other, he had to admit Gu Changyun’s performance was flawless.

He played the part of a spoiled, temperamental favorite consort so well that everyone in the residence saw him as exactly that. As a result, no one ever questioned the status of either concubine.

And by extension, no one ever doubted that Jiang Suizhou was a cut-sleeve.

Jiang Suizhou scanned the area for potential eavesdroppers. Sighting no one, he turned back to Xu Du.

“He probably went back. Don’t mind him—go on ahead,” Jiang Suizhou told him.

In a panic, Meng Qianshan appeared, hurrying over.

“Your Highness!” he exclaimed. “Would you mind checking on Madam Huo?”

Jiang Suizhou frowned.

“What happened?”

Meng Qianshan’s expression became tinged with overt, anxious dread.

“Well… Madam Gu forced his way into Madam Huo’s quarters, a-and your servant was unable to stop him, so…”

He took a shaky breath.

“So…Madam Gu has been sitting there…f-for quite some time now.”

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Wei Kai stood rigid as a flagpole by the medicine stove, glowering at the small clay pot as if he could bore holes through it with his gaze.

Behind him, a stunning figure in red robes lounged elegantly on the daybed, teacup in hand.

It was, of course, Gu Changyun.

The sun that day was unusually strong. Even so early in the morning, it was blisteringly hot as Gu Changyun waited in the courtyard for Xu Du. Time dragged on and on with no sign of him until it became obvious Xu Du must have gotten caught up in the discussions with their prince.

With no end in sight, Gu Changyun refused to endure the sun any longer—especially not in the uncomfortable chair Meng Qianshan had set out for him. Simply leaving without a word would be out of character for the resident drama queen, so he decided to barge into Huo Wujiu's room instead.

The chamber was unexpectedly lively, he discovered. There were three people present, plus a handful of silent servants.

As usual, Huo Wujiu ignored him entirely and remained motionless on the bed. Then there was the physician and apprentice they were housing, whom Gu Changyun had of course met previously. He had evaluated doctors from all over to weed out the ones who were unqualified, and he knew those two had endured their fair share of trials at his hands when they first arrived at the residence.

The moment Gu Changyun entered, the doctor and apprentice both bowed meekly and then quickly turned away. They went about their tasks as if he weren't there at all.

Not that Gu Changyun cared in the slightest. A doctor's job was to administer medicine and treat patients, nothing more. He had no interest in Huo Wujiu's leg injuries and cared even less about the treatment methods and recovery process.

It was all very boring.

He sipped tea while surveying the room, eventually settling his gaze on Huo Wujiu.

He vividly recalled their last encounter, when he first observed the murderous intent simmering beneath those calm dark eyes.

However, Gu Changyun feared no one. That hidden fury intrigued him.

Mere irritation wouldn't have resulted in such intensity. More likely it was jealousy, but even so…wasn't the degree a bit excessive?

Last time, Jiang Suizhou's presence had prevented Gu Changyun from getting a closer look, which was a shame. But now, this unsolved mystery seemed like the perfect way to pass the time.

Setting down his cup, Gu Changyun flashed Huo Wujiu a dazzling smile.

"Such a bright, spacious room. It's even grander than my own," he lamented languidly. "Ah, Madam Huo, you've earned His Highness's favor so quickly! I must say, you make your brother jealous."

Huo Wujiu glanced at him with calm and emotionless eyes, as still as a lifeless pool of water.

Wei Kai, meanwhile, felt his own face grow red with rage, his hands trembling.

This was crossing a line! How dare he treat the great General Huo like some petty harem concubine?! He wouldn’t forget this humiliation!

Then came Huo Wujiu’s reply:

“He just replaced the old with the new, that’s all.”

His tone was flat and rock steady. It didn’t sound like a joke. Wei Kai’s eyes nearly bulged from their sockets.

Chapter 52

HUO WUJIU COULD TELL what this subordinate of Jiang Suizhou's was thinking.

It wouldn't be odd for Gu Changyun to say such a thing if he really were Jiang Suizhou's concubine, but he wasn't. That meant he was merely adopting this demeanor so he could use Huo Wujiu for his own entertainment.

Since being imprisoned in the Prince of Jing's residence, Huo Wujiu had only interacted with Gu Changyun a few times. Recalling the way those encounters had unfolded, he grew even more certain that his suspicions were true.

After uttering that deadpan barb, Huo Wujiu shot him an impassive look.

He wasn't about to allow anyone to get away with this kind of thing, least of all when it was at his own expense.

Gu Changyun was dumbstruck by his response. What had happened to that stoic, taciturn prisoner of war? The man had always been so stubbornly resistant to his teasing that he figured no harm would come out of trying to get a rise out of him when there was nothing else to do.

Unbeknownst to him, Huo Wujiu had been an infamously brazen rascal growing up in Yangguan. As a child, he hid his errant ways beneath layers of reticence and arrogance, as if everyone else was beneath him. In reality, nobody could afford to provoke him.

Some of his peers who'd suffered at his hands even whispered behind his back, calling him a dog that was all bite and no bark.

Every thought in Gu Changyun's head dissipated, and the words stalled in his throat as he stared at Huo Wujiu in astonishment.

"You…"

Huo Wujiu looked back at him, unfazed. Though he was a shocking sight, his lips pale and legs bristling with silver needles, he remained bold as ever. His expression was calm and composed but for the hint of a mocking smirk that played at the corners of his mouth.

"What about me?" he said, casting a furtive glance at the window. "Didn't you come here because you wanted to hear me say that?"

Then he lowered his gaze and withdrew from the conversation.

It took Gu Changyun a moment to pull himself together enough to continue the act, albeit reluctantly. He hadn't expected any reply from Huo Wujiu at all, let alone one that rendered him as speechless as it had.

After being delivered nothing but embarrassment, Gu Changyun stood and prepared to kick up a small fuss to give himself a way out of the situation—an excuse to leave.

"Unbelievable! I simply came for some tea and a pleasant conversation, and this is how you welcome me?! Well, I won't be bothering you any longer, Madam Huo, but only time will tell who ends up replacing who. We'll see just how long you manage to remain in His Highness's favor!"

He whirled around to make his exit…only to see Jiang Suizhou enter the room directly in front of him, his eyebrows knitted in consternation.

Even though they were separated by a small sitting room, Gu Changyun could tell that Jiang Suizhou wasn't very pleased.

"Gu Changyun," Jiang Suizhou said sternly.

Whoops, Gu Changyun thought to himself.

He knew immediately that he'd gone too far this time, and he quickly stepped forward and bowed. "Please forgive your concubine's improper conduct, Your Highness!"

Jiang Suizhou shot him an odd look, at a loss for words.

He knew that Gu Changyun was actually quite levelheaded, though he had a penchant for acting dramatic and spoiled. But why would he make a scene in front of Huo Wujiu just to goad him?

Considering that Gu Changyun was his faithful subordinate, he had no intention of berating him.

"Get out. Now," he commanded. "You are not to enter these rooms again without my permission."

Jiang Suizhou was sparing him further humiliation. Ducking his head, Gu Changyun murmured his agreement and withdrew from the room.

Before he left, he couldn't help but glance at the bed in the innermost chamber.

Huo Wujiu was lying down quietly on the bed with his eyes closed, looking as if he hadn't previously uttered a single thing, while the physician inserted the needles.

Who would've expected a dog with no bark to suddenly bite?

Gu Changyun gritted his teeth.

Huo Wujiu was prideful and arrogant, someone who looked down on the world. He couldn't be bothered to get involved with petty squabbles, which made him seem like an easy target. Yet, to Gu Changyun's surprise, Huo Wujiu was in fact quite cunning when he saw reason to be. Not only that, he was remarkably good at pouring oil on the flames. It had only taken a few words to prod Gu Changyun into slipping up in front of his lord.

This was Gu Changyun's first time making a blunder over something so trivial.

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Jiang Suizhou felt quite remorseful as Gu Changyun exited the room, but he had little choice in how to handle this incident. Gu Changyun's true role was a secret, and there were too many eyes and ears here. It wasn't appropriate for him to say more.

"He won't trouble you again," he said vaguely before he sat down next to the window.

"Mm," Huo Wujiu intoned. He also refrained from further comment as he gazed quietly at the many needles dotting his legs.

Of course he knew that Gu Changyun wasn't going to trouble him again. Truth be told, that man wasn't really capable of "troubling" him in the first place.

Huo Wujiu wanted to taunt him a little, just enough to make his attempt to amuse himself at Huo Wujiu's expense backfire into self-inflicted embarrassment. In the end, he wasn't able to say much before Jiang Suizhou's footsteps had sounded outside.

That had prompted Huo Wujiu to change his line of attack, instead backing Gu Changyun into a corner until he had no choice but to act out. Incidentally, it also allowed Huo Wujiu to distance himself from the situation.

Deep down, he didn't want to leave an unfavorable impression of himself on the Prince of Jing. Because of that, Gu Changyun was the one to embarrass himself in front of the prince.

Well, that said, the prince was also a bit…

He glanced at Jiang Suizhou, who wore a gentle, calm expression as he gazed down at the book in his hands. He wasn't reading it but flipping through it rather haphazardly, distracted, as though he'd done something wrong.

A smile played at the corner of Huo Wujiu's lips, and he looked away.

The way that Jiang Suizhou cared so deeply about Huo Wujiu's emotional state tended to create some illusions he shouldn't have been having.

The atmosphere remained quiet as Huo Wujiu drank his medicine. Once he did so, Li Changning and Wei Kai gathered their things and withdrew from the room.

Only then did Jiang Suizhou speak.

"Gu Changyun likes to joke around, that's all. Don't take it to heart," he said.

"No matter," Huo Wujiu replied as he tugged up the blanket and covered his legs.

Jiang Suizhou let out a sigh and moved to the edge of the bed, still holding the book.

“Thank goodness for your generosity. He really went a bit overboard today.”

Huo Wujiu appeared unperturbed and unruffled, as if he hadn’t deliberately fanned the flames earlier.

“So, as expected, they found letters at Zhao Dunting’s place,” Jiang Suizhou said, moving on. “That’s why Xu Du came by just now.”

“Zhao Dunting?” Huo Wujiu lifted his gaze.

“Qi Min’s student, the one you mentioned the other day, who placed third in the imperial examination ten years ago.”

Huo Wujiu dipped his head. “What kind of letters?”

“Correspondence with Northern Liang,” Jiang Suizhou said. “Forgeries he retrieved from Pang Shao’s residence, but strikingly good ones. They’re even marked with Northern Liang’s official seal.”

At that, Huo Wujiu frowned. “What official seal?”

Jiang Suizhou pulled out the copied letters from his sleeve and passed them to Huo Wujiu.

Unfolding the pages, Huo Wujiu scanned through them until his eyes landed on the stamp at the end. He didn’t speak for a moment.

Jiang Suizhou saw him stiffen and rub the edge of the stamp ever so slightly.

“What is it?” he asked quickly.

When Huo Wujiu finally spoke, his voice was a little strained and rough.

“Pang Shao replicated this?”

Jiang Suizhou nodded. “Yes, is something wrong?”

Huo Wujiu stared down at the stamp with such an intense gaze it seemed as though he wanted to set fire to the letter with his eyes.

“This is a replica of the Crown Prince of Liang’s personal seal,” he said slowly. “An exact copy.”

Jiang Suizhou blinked, puzzled.

The Crown Prince of Liang?

The current emperor of Northern Liang, the Zhaoyuan Emperor, had only three sons—two of whom died in the Battle of Xunyang, the very battle that killed Huo Wujiu’s father and nearly took out the entire Liang army. It also left the Zhaoyuan Emperor with many injuries, from which he’d never fully recovered.

His only surviving son, Huo Yuyan, also developed chronic health issues as a result of the battle. He fell ill and died only a couple of years after he ascended to the throne; at the time of his death, he had just turned thirty.

The seal on these letters belonged to Huo Yuyan.

“So what does this mean?” Jiang Suizhou questioned.

Eyes locked on the stamp, Huo Wujiu opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

He couldn’t bring himself to say that his older cousin’s personal seal was usually only used for confidential letters of the utmost importance.

When he was younger, he and his cousin were often charged with defending different fronts. The correspondence he received from Huo

Yuyan always ended with this seal at the end. He continued to use it regularly in messages to his subordinates, even after his father—Huo Wujiu's uncle—took the throne and became the crown prince.

So…how was Pang Shao able to replicate the design of his seal?

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In the end, Jiang Suizhou did not receive a satisfactory answer that day. Huo Wujiu examined the letters for a while, then announced that he intended to keep them for further study. If anything came of his investigation, he would tell Jiang Suizhou.

At this point, Jiang Suizhou had full faith in Huo Wujiu. After reminding him to keep the letters safe, he handed them over.

In the week that followed, he directed his focus to strategizing and planning out his next steps.

About ten days later, the court was abruptly thrown into upheaval after Qi Min's student, Zhao Dunting, came forward with a shocking discovery.

Zhao Dunting allegedly caught a glimpse of something concealed while he was chatting with Qi Min in his study. Upon leaving the residence, he headed straight for the palace to request an audience with the emperor.

Tears rolled down his face as he explained that his teacher had momentarily lost his reason and committed a regrettable act. He begged His Majesty to spare his teacher's life.

Jiang Shunheng didn’t understand the cause for his upset, so he decided it was simpler to order an immediate investigation of Qi Min’s residence. He never expected Zhao Dunting’s woebegone report would prove accurate, yet the emperor’s men did indeed find incriminating correspondence with the enemy.

To think an experienced, respected official who’d served impartially under three different courts would turn traitor and collude with Northern Liang!

No one suspected that Zhao Dunting could possibly have framed Qi Min. He was more devoted to him than he was to his own father, so why in the world would he dare to do such a thing?

Moreover, when Qi Min faced him in the court, he didn’t utter a single word.

As Zhao Dunting knelt nearby, sobbing, lamenting that Qi Min must have merely been confused, Qi Min remained silent. His face was deathly pale as he stared first at the letters in question, then at Zhao Dunting.

Eventually, he dropped to his knees and kowtowed deeply to the emperor three times.

It signified he had nothing more to say.

Great shock reverberated through the imperial court, and the emperor flew into a rage. He immediately ordered for Qi Min’s entire family to be dragged away and beheaded. Fortunately, several ministers persuaded him out of it, arguing that Qi Min should be locked up first. That way, they could conduct a thorough investigation and determine if he had any accomplices.

The emperor was always hypervigilant when it came to matters related to Northern Liang.

As a result, he followed their advice. He forced himself to swallow his anger and threw Qi Min and his family into prison. Once they got to the bottom of this matter, then he could decide how best to kill him.

Every court official was in a state of panic for some time—except for the Prince of Jing, whose residence was once again the picture of tranquility.

Huo Wujiu glanced out the window for the third time.

Even trapped in his room, he was well aware that the Qi Min incident was causing quite a stir. He'd discussed the plan of action with Jiang Suizhou before the prince sent people to set it in motion.

Today everything would come to a head, so Jiang Suizhou rushed to Xu Du's quarters early that morning to await news from the informants.

"General?"

Li Changning called out to him from somewhere nearby, shaking him loose from his thoughts. The doctor and his apprentice stood next to Huo Wujiu's bed, both watching him expectantly, their gazes fiery and intense.

"No need to worry, General. Just give it a try," Li Changning said.

Huo Wujiu looked away from the window and threw his legs over the side of the bed. Bracing his feet against the steps, he slowly pressed down.

It was a natural, familiar sensation that he had not experienced in a very long time.

His legs still ached, but a newly rediscovered strength thrummed amid the pain. As his muscles drew taut, power rolled through his tendons,

all the way down to the tips of his toes.

Slowly, clumsily, he pushed himself to his feet and remained steady.

Li Changning and Wei Kai each instantly let out quiet cries of joy at the sight.

Carefully, Huo Wujiu tried to lift his leg. His ability to walk remained limited, but for the first time in two months, he could stand again.

Exclamations of surprise and excitement came from those by his side, and there were even tears glistening in Wei Kai’s eyes. But for some reason, Huo Wujiu didn’t feel as happy as he’d expected.

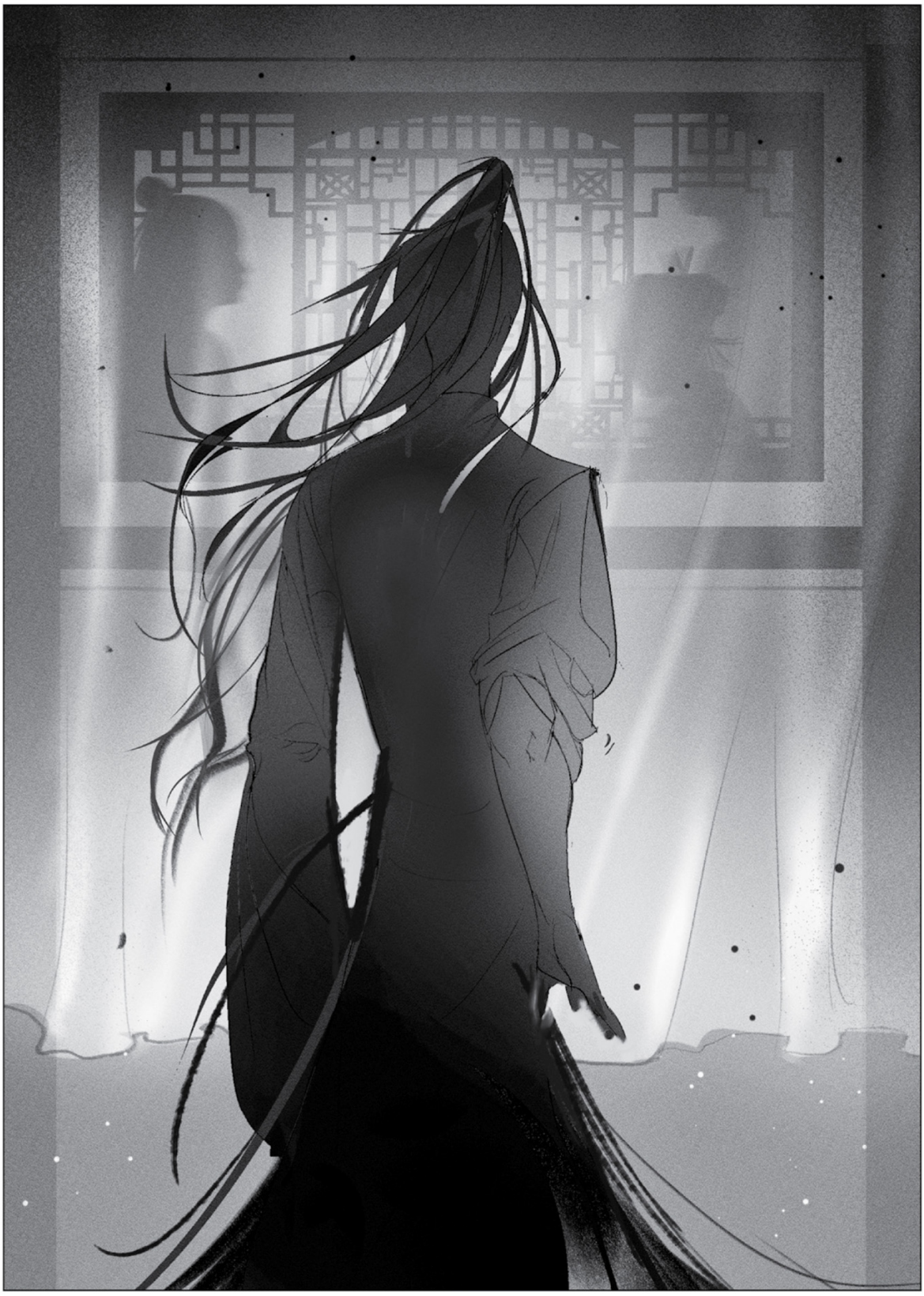
He glanced out the window for the fourth time.

The doors to Anyin Hall’s main room were thrown wide open, and servants bustled in and out. Anyin Hall’s master, however, wasn’t inside.

Huo Wujiu paused. Then he averted his gaze and sat back down on the bed.

Before today, he never realized that joy, too, needed to be shared with someone in order to be truly savored.

But not just anyone. It had to be with a certain special someone in particular.



Chapter 53

SOME THINGS, once left unspoken for long enough, became nearly impossible to say later. Similarly, a lie left uncorrected became challenging to ever right.

For instance, the truth surrounding Li Changning.

The physician had lied to Jiang Suizhou from their very first meeting, claiming Huo Wujiu's legs couldn't be healed. And though Wei Kai pretended to be Li Changning's disciple, he was in truth Huo Wujiu's subordinate.

Because Huo Wujiu didn't correct those lies when they were first uttered, he couldn't tell Jiang Suizhou that he could now stand up. Rather than sharing joy, he would be implicitly admitting his earlier deceit.

Maybe he felt so troubled because he didn't have much experience lying to others, so he lacked any frame of reference for such a situation. Or maybe it was because he couldn't bear for Jiang Suizhou to know that he'd purposefully hidden things from him, and the guilt inexplicably clung to him like mist.

Whatever the reason, he forced himself to push down that compelling urge to share this new development with Jiang Suizhou. When he swallowed these words, they lodged themselves in his throat like fish bones, bringing nothing but discomfort.

Oblivious to Huo Wujiu's internal conflict, Jiang Suizhou sat with Xu Du in his living quarters, drinking tea and waiting for events to unfold.

A few days ago, he consulted Huo Wujiu about this incident and presented to him a fairly high-risk plan. Once he received Huo Wujiu's approval, he set about making the appropriate preparations.

First, he sifted through all the contacts in the original prince's network until he found an ally planted in the Ministry of Justice. He reached out to him in private and found the man more than willing to help once he learned of how Qi Min had been framed. During the court assembly, it was this official that had ultimately saved Qi Min's life earlier.

Jiang Suizhou instructed him to wait until the emperor's fury reached its peak, then speak up to argue that Qi Min should keep his life for the time being. The surest way of doing this was to first act as though he were filled with righteous indignation at Qi Min's alleged crimes—and then point out that he might not be the only traitor among them. Jiang Suizhou had told him to posit that only once Qi Min had been thoroughly investigated would they be able to eliminate the root of the problem.

Pang Shao and Zhao Dunting kept their scheme so well-concealed that very few people knew of it, even those from their own faction. The Ministry of Justice official's suggestion was reasonable enough that even members of Pang Shao's own faction would ignorantly support it. After all, the only ones caught in the cross fire would be those who opposed Pang Shao, so there were no downsides to this as far as they were concerned.

Thus, Qi Min was momentarily out of mortal danger.

Setting the stage for someone else to take it.

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Chaos erupted in the immediate aftermath of that bold proposal from the Ministry of Justice official.

Many agreed with him and promptly knelt in support, petitioning for Qi Min to remain alive for a few more days in order to extract intel from him before his execution.

The emperor, always lacking in the ability to form his own opinions, found himself easily swayed by the commotion. When he saw the dense crowd of kneeling court officials, he immediately ordered a thorough investigation of everyone who had any connection with Qi Min.

None dared to defy his command.

And then, with a loud *thump*, another official fell to his knees.

“His Majesty is absolutely correct! Qi Min should be investigated. Anyone in this court who has been in contact with Northern Liang deserves to die a thousand deaths for their grievous crimes!” he said. “However, your official has an urgent concern and humbly requests permission from His Majesty to speak it!”

All gazes converged on the sixth-rank official who worked under Qi Min.

This official had only passed the imperial examination a few years ago, and he’d been working for the Grand Master of Ceremonies ever since he entered the court. He wasn’t particularly close to Qi Min, but he could more or less be considered part of the same faction.

Silence descended over the court as everyone waited to hear what he would say next.

“Continue,” the emperor said.

The official looked around the hall before pressing his forehead to the floor.

“I fear Qi Min’s traitorous correspondence was only discovered by chance, because he was caught unprepared and consequently red-handed. If His Majesty makes it widely known that an investigation is imminent, the guilty will have plenty of time to cover their tracks. In that case, even a spy would have a difficult time ferreting them out.”

That logic made sense to the emperor.

He nodded repeatedly. “Then, what does my dear official suggest instead?”

“Qi Min is close to several other ministers and graduates in this court,” the young official said through clenched teeth. “Even if your official does not name them, His Majesty should know who they are.”

He lifted his head and continued, “Why not send the palace guards to search their homes right now, Your Majesty? All the officials present could remain here, in the hall, until the investigation is completed.”

Astonishment rippled through the nearby officials.

What kind of suggestion was this? Keeping all the court officials rounded up like they were criminals and dispatching the palace guards to search through their homes?

How utterly ludicrous!

At the same time, it was plain to everyone that this fellow was attempting to pull off a high-stakes gamble in anticipation of Qi Min’s impending downfall. As he was undeniably associated with Qi Min, he’d decided to make the first move and betray those who were even more

closely linked to the minister. It was his bid to gain the upper hand and win favor with the emperor.

In a heartbeat, every official with some connection to Qi Min grew slightly worried. Quite a few people glared viciously at the sixth-rank official, assuming that he was throwing them to the wolves.

A trace of delight flashed across Pang Shao's face.

Those officials affiliated with Qi Min might not be entirely clean. Even if the investigation failed to uncover evidence related to the "connivance" with Northern Liang, it would undoubtedly bring to light all kinds of information that he could then use against them. He might as well use this as an opportunity to completely eliminate both Qi Min and what little influence he had in the court, should any of his allies care to avenge him.

With that in mind, he stepped forward.

"Your official humbly concurs—collusion with the enemy is an offense that cannot be underestimated. It would be most beneficial to Your Majesty to accept this suggestion."

With Pang Shao's added support, the emperor, having already been partially convinced, made up his mind at once.

"We shall proceed with my dear official's proposal."

Instantly, a list of names rolled smoothly off Pang Shao's tongue in response to the emperor's command. They were all officials who constantly opposed him, but whom he could never dig up any dirt on.

After Pang Shao finished reciting his list, the official who had made the initial suggestion spoke again.

“Your Majesty, even though Official Zhao Dunting was the one who reported Qi Min, he cannot be excluded from the search. He was once Qi Min’s student, and so he has historically been on friendly terms with him.”

Pang Shao shot an unreadable look at the official.

The official gazed up at the emperor, waiting for his response.

Pang Shao sneered to himself.

What a shortsighted fool, so eager for quick success that he stopped using his head. To think he’d insist on interjecting, even after Pang Shao had already spoken. His attempts to distinguish himself from the crowd reeked of desperation, and it only caused him to step out of line instead.

But it mattered little—there was no proof of Pang Shao’s dealings with Zhao Dunting, anyway. The only conclusive pieces of evidence were the letters that had been used to frame Qi Min, and those had been planted in Qi Min’s study long ago. Zhao Dunting had no reason to fear an investigation. In fact, being included in the search might even clear him of suspicion.

“How careless of me to forget Official Zhao,” Pang Shao said, casting a cold glance at the official. “Given his relationship with Qi Min, include him in the investigation as well.”

***

Updates on the turmoil in the court were passed briskly along to the Prince of Jing.

Jiang Suizhou watched as the situation shifted bit by bit in the direction that he had arranged, and the knot in his stomach gradually loosened.

As the evening colors spread through the sky, the most important news came in.

Letters were found in Zhao Dunting's residence.

All from Pang Shao, no less, and stowed away in an exceptionally well-hidden secret compartment.

Seemingly written by one of Pang Shao's eunuchs, the letters gave Zhao Dunting step-by-step instructions on how to frame Qi Min—including how to plant the correspondence that Pang Shao had prepared in Qi Min's study, under the pretense of visiting him while he was ill.

Everything that had taken place in recent days, even down to the most trivial detail, could be traced back to the contents of those letters.

Zhao Dunting looked shocked to see the letters, and he protested that he'd been wrongly accused. Unfortunately for him, the evidence was irrefutable, and he had no adequate defense for himself. He was immediately thrown into prison, switching places with Qi Min.

Pang Shao also found himself scrambling to explain his side of things to the emperor, but Jiang Shunheng was having none of it. For the first time, he lost his temper with Pang Shao and had him dragged out of the palace.

Pang Shao's deception hadn't involved actual collusion with the enemy state, so Jiang Suizhou knew his punishment would amount to no more than a slap on the wrist—despite the fact that he'd nearly succeeded in framing another official.

However, the cracks developing between him and the last emperor would only grow deeper and wider as a result of this incident until they eventually became unbridgeable.

To Pang Shao, this loss was more devastating than any official punishment.

Jiang Suizhou instructed Xu Du to wrap up the loose ends, then returned to Anyin Hall with a sigh of relief.

As he passed by the garden, he redirected the palanquin to the residence’s wine cellar and selected two jars of fine liquor.

A momentous occasion deserved to be celebrated properly.

By the time he made it back to Anyin Hall, all the lamps were already ablaze. He stepped down from the palanquin with the jars in his arms, but just as he started toward the main room, he hesitated.

Standing in the center of the courtyard, he found his gaze drawn to the north, where the lights in Huo Wujiu’s room flickered against the window screens.

Something stirred in Jiang Suizhou’s chest.

Well, he couldn’t indulge in such fine liquor alone, now could he? That wouldn’t be much of a celebration.

On that note, he turned on his heel and sought that expanse of warm light.

Chapter 54

QI MIN WAS IN PRISON for less than a day. He was released completely unscathed.

Though the emperor had disliked this pedantic old scholar since he was a child, he even felt guilty enough about the incident to summon him and offer brief consolation before allowing him to go home.

At last, as the evening lanterns were lit, Qi Min returned to his residence.

The rest of his family had been released from prison as well, and they waited to welcome him in front of the main gates. Several of his good friends stood alongside them. When they saw him climb down from the carriage, they all hurried forward to congratulate him.

Surviving certain tragedy was something to be celebrated. Once Qi Min finished exchanging greetings with everyone, he ushered them into his residence so they could share a meal together before departing.

Naturally, no one turned down his invitation.

Qi Min ordered for a feast to be prepared, all in the name of celebration. It was on the simpler side—he was quite frugal to begin with, and the guards found little gold and silver to confiscate in his residence when they searched it.

Either way, the attendees were all his closest friends, and they knew what to expect of him.

Thus, they closed the doors to the room and commenced festivities. Soon enough, the warmth of the wine and food loosened their tongues.

“Only in the court assembly today did I come to understand how coldhearted some people can be,” one of the officials said woozily, waving a cup of wine.

The buzz of conversation petered out, and the room slowly fell quiet.

“It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say Minister Qi has students across the land,” continued the same man. “Among those I’ve met, every single one was an intellectual well-versed in the classics. Yet all the people who framed him today, who poured oil on the fire, who seized the chance to distance themselves from him, were once students he’d painstakingly supported!”

Even though Qi Min had never formally taken up the mantle of a teacher, the scholar-gentry always placed great value on rules. Every prospective scholar had to pass the imperial examination if they wanted to become a court official. Those who were successful had a tradition of extending deep gratitude toward their examiner for recognizing their potential. Thus, they frequently referred to their examiner as their teacher.

Qi Min had already served as chief examiner for countless iterations of the exam.

At the official’s words, the banquet room went dead silent.

A second later, another official knocked back the remaining liquor in his cup before setting the cup back down on the table with a forceful *thunk*.

“Dunting…! Who could’ve expected Dunting to do something like this!”

All the men in the room knew how filial Zhao Dunting had appeared. A decade ago, the younger man fell on hard times and ended up wretchedly poor. He sold his ancestral home and lands, all so he could come to the

capital to take the imperial examination, only to end up robbed of everything on the road outside the city. By the time he made it into the capital, he only had the clothes on his back.

By pure coincidence, he happened to encounter Qi Min, who offered his financial support when Zhao Dunting was at his absolute lowest. It was only by the kindness of Qi Min that he was able to find his footing in the capital and participate in the examination.

From that point on, Zhao Dunting did all that he could to repay Qi Min, never once wavering in his loyalty. This, too, was something they'd all observed.

Their expressions grew even graver. After a long moment of silence, Qi Min picked up some food with his chopsticks and brought it to his mouth.

"I never formally taught him anything. He relied entirely on his own abilities and fortune to pass the examination and serve the imperial court," he said steadily. "As I can't really be considered his teacher, his actions can't really be considered a betrayal."

Sighs rippled through the room.

"Well, there is some good in what happened today," one of the guests mused. "The true nature of certain individuals was revealed—a blessing in disguise for Duke Qi."

"Indeed," echoed another sitting nearby. "I must say, however, that fellow working under Minister Qi—Zhang Yan—who pestered His Majesty to investigate Minister Qi's close friends… He's a conniving one."

Everyone nodded.

Qi Min lowered his chopsticks.

“He’s not,” Qi Min said.

“Minister Qi, you mean to say…?”

“He appeared to kick me while I was down today, but in doing so, he dragged Zhao Dunting out into the open,” Qi Min said in a measured voice, gazing at his cup. “If it weren’t for him, my head would be long parted from my body. On the contrary, it seemed more like he’d been informed of something in advance and acted accordingly to save me.”

Silence fell over the table once more.

“I just don’t know how he obtained that information, nor who gave it to him.”

“Minister Qi, I know Zhang Yan personally,” one man offered after a brief pause. “Several days ago, he let something slip whilst drinking.”

Qi Min looked in his direction, prompting the official to go on.

“He said…he had to do something for His Highness, the Prince of Jing. Even though he was putting his life on the line, he said it had to be done.”

***

By early evening, the raid on the Zhao residence wrapped up.

The imperial soldiers retreated. Everyone in the household, from family to servants, had either been arrested or dismissed. After the heavy front gates slowly swung shut, someone promptly put up a notice that the residence had been sealed off.

The bustling residence grew quiet and dark.

Across the eaves darted multiple silhouettes, moving extraordinarily quickly, like owls in the night. Concealed by the shadows, they shot over the walls and disappeared into the darkness in the blink of an eye.

These figures were the elite guards that Xu Du commanded on behalf of the Prince of Jing.

In a flash, they vanished into a gloomy side street. In the fifteen minutes it took to burn half an incense stick, the people clad in stealth gear were nowhere to be found. The street cleared once more.

Meanwhile, a few unremarkable male servants entered the Prince of Jing's residence, dressed in short, coarse robes, carrying some miscellaneous items they'd purchased from the market.

Unbeknownst to them, that nearby side street branched off into an eventual dead end. If someone turned into that back alley and walked for some time, they would find their senses assailed by the stench of blood.

Over a dozen corpses littered the dark street, forming a small hill. Several men lurked soundlessly in the shadows nearby.

The bodies were their handiwork.

Another figure approached, his footsteps so faint they were almost inaudible. He came to a halt in front of the corpses and glanced around.

"Time to go," the man said evenly.

The shadowy figures, perched on top of the wall like venomous snakes, sprang to life at the sound of his voice. One of them slipped down from the wall and yanked off his mask as he walked over to the bodies. He gave them a casual kick.

“Finally, it’s over,” he said. “I have to admit, Old Wily Pang’s hit men really have some skill.”

The man who’d just approached in silence also tugged off his mask.

It was Wei Kai, returning from lookout duty.

“Brothers, I’ll have to ask you to clean up this mess,” he said, glancing at the bodies. “Be sure to leave no trace behind.”

“Don’t worry, Captain Wei,” one of the men said. “Rest assured, we’ll take care of it.”

They briskly got to work in the darkness.

“I wonder what General Huo was thinking. I assumed this was going to be something serious, since even Captain Wei was dispatched,” remarked the same man as he helped clean up.

Another person chuckled. “No kidding. Judging from the size of our group, I was rolling up my sleeves and gearing up to break General Huo out of the Prince of Jing’s residence.”

“Yet all we were asked to do was secretly protect a few elite guards,” a third piped up. “Captain Wei, do you know who these elite guards work for? To be so highly valued?”

“Enough chitchat,” Wei Kai reprimanded with a stern glare. “Work faster.”

The men laughed a little, but soon enough they stopped talking and continued with the task at hand with efficient ease.

Wei Kai supervised from nearby, his eyebrows furrowed tightly together.

In truth, his men weren't the only ones who were confused. Wei Kai himself couldn't identify the intent behind this mission.

He vaguely knew that the Prince of Jing was going to take on Pang Shao; likewise, he'd heard whispers that the prince's plan had succeeded.

Long before this, General Huo had instructed him to gather a group of men and lie in wait in the shadows until the elite guards escorting Jiang Suizhou had retreated.

Indeed, General Huo possessed an almost otherworldly foresight, and everything happened just as he'd predicted. Pang Shao's hit men came to nose around, and Wei Kai and the others killed them all. But…why? Wei Kai didn't understand why the general chose to do something so seemingly unnecessary.

Was it because he wanted to take out some of Pang Shao's subordinates, or was it because there truly was something exceptional about the prince's elite guards?

***

The original Prince of Jing appeared to be an avid collector of a particular type of fine liquor, but he rarely if ever drank it. When Jiang Suizhou looked through the cellar, he found numerous jars of this fancy liquor that had been carefully stored away for years, brought all the way from Yecheng.

Jiang Suizhou made his way to Huo Wujiu's room with two of those jars, eager to celebrate. Surely well-aged liquors from the northern region wouldn't be too terribly strong, would they?

He arrived just after Huo Wujiu had finished dinner to find him sitting on the bed—and suddenly remembered something important. Huo Wujiu was still healing from his injuries, so perhaps this was a bad idea.

“Ah, right, you’re taking medicine these days,” he rushed to say. “Is it all right for you to drink alcohol?”

Huo Wujiu curiously eyed the jars in his arms.

“Success?” he asked.

Of course Jiang Suizhou knew what he was referring to. He raised a hand and dismissed the servants so he could speak openly.

“Yes, a success,” he said, smiling. “Everything went according to plan.”

Huo Wujiu’s gaze lingered on those curled lips for a long moment.

After Jiang Suizhou set the jars on the table, he sat down on the left side.

“I was intending to celebrate with you, but I forgot to consider whether you could drink, what with your injuries and the treatment,” he said. “Perhaps another time, then? The alcohol isn’t too important.”

“Celebrate with me?” Huo Wujiu echoed.

Jiang Suizhou nodded.

“At the end of the day, there is deep enmity between you and Pang Shao. You must be happy to hear he was dealt such a heavy blow.”

An overblown and pompous statement but not untrue, though slightly jarring when delivered under the pleasant glow of the lamps.

Pausing, he placed one hand on the liquor jar and rested his chin atop it. As he gazed at Huo Wujiu, another smile bloomed across his face.

“Admittedly, I don’t have many others to turn to for celebration. Only a scant few had any knowledge of this plan to begin with. Gu Changyun isn’t a particularly reliable drinking companion, and Xu Du is busy tying up loose ends,” he lamented. “If it weren’t for you, wouldn’t I simply suffocate?”

The prince appeared to be exceptionally relaxed this evening. The longstanding veneer of arrogance had been stripped away almost entirely, revealing the languid, gentle demeanor beneath.

Huo Wujiu let his actions speak for him. He deftly pulled over the wheelchair with one hand and transferred himself onto it with a bit of force. Then he rolled himself over to the table so he was directly across from Jiang Suizhou.

Without a word, he opened one of the jars of liquor.

A heady fragrance promptly wafted into the air, quickly diffusing through the room.

Slightly taken aback, Jiang Suizhou hastily lifted a hand to stop him.

“Can you even drink right now? It’s fine if you can’t. We shouldn’t let this affect your recovery process…”

Huo Wujiu looked up. His dark eyes gleamed especially bright under the lamplight. Maybe that was why Jiang Suizhou found himself under the inexplicable impression that those eyes were brimming with mirth.

“You’ve already brought the liquor here,” Huo Wujiu said. “Are we drinking it or not?”

Was it mirth? If so, it wasn’t exactly visible, nor could Jiang Suizhou pinpoint how it could be. And yet, at the same time, it was obvious in its own way—like sunlight glancing off the tip of a spear.

Momentarily stunned by the flash, he pulled his arm back and allowed Huo Wujiu to pick up the jar. Holding it in one hand, he then scooped up two nearby bowls. With smooth and practiced movements, he filled them up.

Jiang Suizhou only snapped out of his daze after Huo Wujiu placed one of the bowls in front of him. He stared at it, dumbstruck.

The liquor in the bowl was remarkably clear and cold, the fragrance heavy and full-bodied. He could tell from the smell alone just how strong this stuff actually was. The bowl wasn't exactly small either. The surface of the liquid glimmered under the flickering lamps, and Jiang Suizhou involuntarily shrank back a little.

He'd never seen anyone use a bowl to drink baijiu[5]—not even prior to transmigrating.

Jiang Suizhou eyed the bowl blankly, then turned to Huo Wujiu.

"We're drinking from these?" he asked.

Huo Wujiu looked puzzled. "What else would you use?"

It took him a moment to put the pieces together. Of course, people in the capital didn't have to drink alcohol from bowls, unlike those living on the frontier, where there was a perpetual supply shortage. Flashy, decorative cups and goblets were rare in the north. Most people used the same dishware to both eat and drink.

A wave of irritation swept through him—he felt as though he'd revealed his uncouth roots.

"It slipped my mind," he said. "I'll ask someone to bring some cups."

He started to turn his wheelchair toward the door, only for Jiang Suizhou to stop him.

Something not unlike pride dashed across the Prince of Jing's face, fueled by a desire to appear knowledgeable.

"Don't worry about it. Pang Shao's encountered such misfortune today, it's worth drinking liquor from a bowl to celebrate," he said through gritted teeth.

As Huo Wujiu watched Jiang Suizhou pick up the bowl using both hands, he suddenly remembered the day the prince had come back drunk and smelling of sweet wine. While Huo Wujiu didn't know for sure what he drank, the scent clinging to his clothes and hair told him that it couldn't have been hard liquor.

This man's tolerance for alcohol was clearly low enough that Huo Wujiu briefly considered advising him against drinking that bowl of baijiu.

But the moment that thought crossed his mind, another subsumed it —a vivid memory of Jiang Suizhou losing his balance and tumbling into his lap.

He hesitated, then swallowed back down his unspoken objection.

That night when he'd held him, it had been like holding an armful of sweet osmanthus flowers.

Chapter 55

HUO WUJIU HAD NO IDEA that Jiang Suizhou could be such a handful after indulging in alcohol.

The prince began showing signs of tipsiness merely half a jar in, and the words rolled easily off his tongue.

He appeared to be quite pleased with himself regarding today's events, and he rambled on about all the groundwork he'd laid in the past few days. Unfortunately, his memory worsened as the liquor in his bowl diminished, and he started to repeat the same things over and over.

Though he had much to say, his voice was light and slow. There was a gentle eloquence to his words, despite the drunken lilt, like the caress of a warm breeze.

Across the table, Huo Wujiu responded to him patiently. Soon enough, Jiang Suizhou gradually slumped sideways, and his speech inevitably began to slur together.

Remembering that Jiang Suizhou still had to return to his own room later, Huo Wujiu felt a small pang of regret that he didn't switch the bowls for cups earlier. He made sure to give Jiang Suizhou a measured pour as he refilled their bowls.

However, drunk as he was, Jiang Suizhou remained sharp enough that he quickly discovered Huo Wujiu's prudence and promptly complained.

He pointed at the two bowls on the table, his eyes rather unfocused and glassy.

“Isn’t this a bit too unfair?” he asked.

The bowl in front of Huo Wujiu was filled to the brim, while the one in front of him had but a shallow, perfunctory layer coating the bottom.

“Oh, you didn’t finish your bowl earlier,” Huo Wujiu bluffed.

Jiang Suizhou didn’t answer immediately. He stared at the bowl for several seconds before breaking into a drunken smile, as though he’d suddenly recalled something.

“I forgot,” he said leisurely. “I’m sorry, that was impolite of me.”

Then, before Huo Wujiu could stop him, he picked up his bowl and polished off the remaining liquor in one gulp.

Huo Wujiu’s eyebrow involuntarily ticked up. This man was so effortlessly duped, and so sincere about it too.

It was a good thing he hadn’t gone out drinking with others tonight instead—he would be a little too easy to bully.

Since his bowl was newly emptied, Huo Wujiu was obligated to pour some more liquor for him. It was still just a tiny splash that barely covered the bottom of the bowl.

After babbling on for a while longer, Jiang Suizhou made a bemused noise and peered into his bowl.

“I didn’t finish my drink again?” he asked.

As he reached for the bowl, Huo Wujiu’s hand shot out and clamped down on Jiang Suizhou’s wrist. He gently extracted the jade bowl from the prince’s weak grip and placed it further away on the table.

“So, you were describing how Zhao Dunting cried to Jiang Shunheng?” he said, changing the topic.

“Ah!” Jiang Suizhou immediately abandoned all thoughts of the bowl.

“According to the court officials, he knelt at the bottom of the stairs and burst into tears as soon as his knees touched the ground,” he rambled, a smile tugging at his lips. “His Majesty was actually so alarmed he thought at first that someone had died in Zhao Dunting’s household!”

Joy danced across his face as he told this tale.

“He must’ve been so proud of his acting, like he’d pulled off the ultimate scheme right under everyone’s noses. Didn’t expect anybody would have any dirt on him, did he? Little did he know, there was an even greater danger lurking behind him…”

This was, in fact, the third or fourth time Huo Wujiu had heard this story tonight.

Normally, he had no patience for such nonsense—his subordinates knew to prepare in advance before reporting to him, in case they weren’t succinct enough and sparked his irritation.

But he was surprisingly fond of hearing Jiang Suizhou rehash the same things over and over.

Perhaps it was because the Prince of Jing dropped all pretense as soon as he became intoxicated, allowing Huo Wujiu to glimpse the soft, mild-mannered interior concealed underneath the fox’s coat.

Or perhaps it was simply because he found Jiang Suizhou’s speaking voice to be pleasant. Regardless of what he was talking about, something about his tone made him seem like a teacher giving a lecture. There was a calm, composed quality to his voice that Huo Wujiu felt was distinctive to scholars and surprisingly enjoyable to listen to.

Or…maybe it was because right now, Jiang Suizhou was truly happy, from the bottom of his heart. The way his eyes glittered with genuine delight was an exceptionally pleasing sight.

Huo Wujiu gradually finished off the rest of the liquor.

The “celebration” lasted until the moon crept high above the trees and all the lights outside were extinguished. Despite Huo Wujiu’s valiant efforts, Jiang Suizhou ended up completely and utterly intoxicated.

Now he sat with his arms crossed on the table, face nestled in the crook of his elbow. A pair of glistening eyes peered hazily over his sleeve.

No longer talking, he merely gazed at Huo Wujiu.

Huo Wujiu swallowed uncomfortably, then grabbed his bowl and drained the rest of the liquor.

As he set down the bowl, Jiang Suizhou’s indolent voice rang out in response, colored with an unmistakable trace of delight.

“Ah, how wonderful…Huo Wujiu.”

Huo Wujiu just watched as Jiang Suizhou closed his eyes and buried his face deeper in his arms, like a small creature sleepily trying to burrow.

“It’s been a long time since I last talked to someone like this.” He was nearly murmuring at this point. “It’s been so lonely, but at least I have you.”

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The bright light of Pang Shao’s residence blazed, even as midnight passed.

Its master stood in the covered corridor that ran along a courtyard. The plum trees filling it were in full bloom, like clouds wreathing a mountain peak; they seemed to glow under the warm light of the red lanterns.

“They still haven’t returned?” Pang Shao asked evenly, looking down at the subordinate kneeling before him.

The man prostrated himself, not daring to lift his head.

“Your subordinate’s incompetence is to blame!” he said. “More men have already been sent to search for them. My comrades will make it back tonight, without a doubt!”

Pang Shao gazed at him. A moment later, he sneered.

“You are indeed incompetent,” he said. “However, those *things* are surely even more incompetent.”

A full-body quiver ran through the subordinate.

“Call off the search,” Pang Shao ordered, exhaling slowly. “They would’ve returned by now if they could’ve.”

The subordinate pressed himself even flatter against the ground.

“You know what your punishment should be,” Pang Shao said, and with that, he turned to go back inside.

Behind him, the subordinate kowtowed repeatedly at the foot of the stairs.

“Thank you for your generosity, Grand Chancellor! Thank you for your generosity!”

The door opened, and bright lamplight from the room spread over him briefly before the door slid shut behind Pang Shao, leaving the trembling man in darkness once more.

In the room, several Pang faction officials stood around an empty chair, looking expectant. Of course, Pang Shao immediately took the seat of honor.

“Impressive,” he said. “Never before have I encountered someone as capable. Now, however, I can say I understand how it feels.”

One of the officials stepped forward.

“Grand Chancellor, not a single one of your hit men survived?”

Pang Shao didn’t reply.

His silence was an agreement in itself. The official paced in circles hesitantly.

“How can this be?” he finally exclaimed. “We are all aware of the formidable skill possessed by the hit men you’ve had trained, Grand Chancellor. They’ve never once been defeated—but they were completely wiped out this time? It’s just…truly unbelievable! Who could be behind this?!”

Pang Shao stared fixedly at the leaping flame of the candle on the table.

“It wasn’t entirely useless,” he said. “At the very least, my suspicions were confirmed. This is proof that someone has had their eye on Zhao Dunting for a while now, tampering with his residence like this.”

“But if the culprit remains at large, there’s no way to prove who did it!” another official remarked. “Everything seemed to just fall into place today, yet the true mastermind is still hidden behind the curtain.”

After another lengthy silence, Pang Shao’s hand closed around the cup of tea on the table.

“Speculation requires no evidence,” he said. “I already know who it is in my heart. That’s enough.”

While tracing his finger in slow circles around the lid of the teacup, he tilted his head and gazed due south—in the direction of Qinghe Ward.

“Of course it’s the person who first fanned the flames, who ultimately came out on top, who’s been secretly competing with me,” he said with calm certainty. “There’s no doubt in my mind.”

His voice was mild, without the slightest hint of anger, yet everyone in the room felt a chill run down their spines.

They could tell from the way he spoke that he wasn’t planning on elaborating further, nor did anyone have the courage to push the issue.

One of the officials cautiously approached Pang Shao to change the topic.

“Indeed, your mind is an all-seeing mirror, Grand Chancellor. We humble officials have nothing to worry about. But concerning His Majesty… Is there anything we can do?”

The emperor had thrown quite a fit today at the Grand Chancellor, and every official in the imperial court knew about it.

He’d even stopped calling him “Uncle.” For the first time ever, he’d called Pang Shao by his full name.

At present, Pang Shao was an imposing figure of great renown, but it was no secret that his power was built entirely on the fact that the emperor would heed his every word without question.

Pang Shao let out a scoff as he picked up the cup of tea and lifted the lid.

“What happened today was the result of a disagreement between Zhao Dunting and Qi Min, and no one else. In an attempt to bring down Zhao Dunting, they borrowed my name in a vain attempt to frame me incidentally. That’s exactly how it went down—need I teach you what to say to His Majesty?”

All the officials bowed at him, hands cupped, indicating that they understood.

Lowering his eyes, Pang Shao turned his attention to his tea.

He took only a single sip, then put the cup down again and gazed at the rippling liquid.

“Such top-grade pre-Qingming Longjing tea,[6]” he sighed, “and steeped to ruin, for no good reason.”

With a loud clink, Pang Shao returned his cup to the table, and a nearby attendant hurried forward in response.

“Find out who steeped this,” he said nonchalantly. “They should pay with their life for squandering such fine tea.”

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By now, Jiang Suizhou was so thoroughly drunk that he could only slump across the table, where he lay motionless.

Huo Wujiu pushed himself over to grab Jiang Suizhou’s arm and help him sit up. Jiang Suizhou’s eyes remained closed, and his limbs flopped uselessly, as if the copious amounts of alcohol had liquefied his bones. Following the momentum of being tugged upright, he tilted toward Huo Wujiu.

Rather abruptly, the prince went from passed out on the table to nestling against Huo Wujiu’s arm.

Huo Wujiu froze in place, as if someone had struck his pressure points. A tingling sensation spread up that arm and into the left side of his

chest, where an uncomfortable sort of numbness took root. A moment ago, he'd intended to call for Meng Qianshan, but the words stalled in his throat as he looked down at the man pressed limply against him.

His eyelashes shimmered in the golden lamplight, and a sheen of liquor still coated his lips, wet and glistening.

Huo Wujiu swallowed.

Jiang Suizhou shifted. Seemingly a bit uncomfortable with his resting position, he shifted and plunged headlong into Huo Wujiu's embrace. A muffled sound escaped his lips to flutter briefly in Huo Wujiu's ears, which almost immediately flushed bright red.

There was a sickening knot sitting somewhere in Huo Wujiu's chest; this had lit the entire thing on fire. Once ignited, the flame seared a path straight to his head until—*boom!*

Something inside him snapped, melted weak by the blaze.

His hand, still closed around Jiang Suizhou's arm, slackened in its grip as it began to tremble.

All of a sudden, he became exceedingly aware of something.

While it was true that Jiang Suizhou didn't harbor any improper thoughts toward him, Huo Wujiu, on the other hand… He stared. Well, somewhere along the way, he seemed to have developed some less than pure thoughts for Jiang Suizhou.

He'd grown up surrounded by other boys and men, constantly tussling and horsing around with his peers. By all rights, he probably should've felt some amount of shock or even disgust at this revelation, but he didn't. All he felt in his heart was a complicated mix of uneasiness and trepidation.

Huo Wujiu had never been particularly fond of anything—in fact, he was always rather indifferent to almost everything.

This was his first time experiencing such an overwhelming wave of possessiveness and affection for someone, and because those emotions crashed over him with such force, they gave way to fear, amid his flustered disbelief.

As it turned out, even the bravest of men became cowards in the face of those they harbored deep affection for.

Head lowered, Huo Wujiu continued to gaze fixedly at the man in his arms. He looked almost like a carved statue as he sat completely still, gently illuminated by the lamplight. Hu Wujiu didn’t dare move a single muscle.

That was until Jiang Suizhou shifted again.

Finally, Huo Wujiu came to his senses, but it was already much too late. He glanced at the door, lips parting to once again try to call for Meng Qianshan, yet no words came out.

Huo Wujiu hadn’t read any classic literature before, and should he be confronted with the infamous proverb “refrain from taking advantage of a dark room,” he wouldn’t understand its meaning. The importance of suppressing one’s innate instincts and making the right choices, even when no one else was around to watch, was not something he’d ever been taught.

And yet, wicked and possessive as this dragon might be, what it desired most was to safeguard its precious treasure.

To that end, he tightened his arms about Jiang Suizhou, gathering him fully into his lap, and then he bent forward and carefully stood up from the wheelchair.

Having only just regained his ability to stand, he still found it quite strenuous to walk. Nonetheless, he took slow, steady steps carrying Jiang Suizhou over to his bed.

He lowered him onto it, and as the prince's head touched the pillow, his eyes fluttered open.

A delayed smile crept across his face when he saw Huo Wujiu.

"Huo Wujiu," he started to say, though his words were but the faintest whisper accompanied by the movement of his lips.

"I won't let you…" His voice trailed off into near inaudibility, the rustling of his robes as he shifted further muffling the sound of his continued murmuring. "…kill me. Not ready to…" He settled. "…die."

In the depths of his drunken stupor, Jiang Suizhou accidentally let slip his true thoughts, but Huo Wujiu caught only the beginning and end of them.

All he heard Jiang Suizhou say was "Huo Wujiu, I won't let you die."

Chapter 56

WHEN JIANG SUIZHOU woke up the next day, the sight of an unfamiliar canopy greeted him.

Just as he was about to turn over and sit up, a throb of pain spiked through his head. The slightest movement sent a wave of dizziness crashing through him.

Knitting his brows, he allowed himself a moment to recover on the bed. Once the world finally stopped spinning so wildly around him, he slowly pushed himself into a sitting position.

His surroundings were bright with gentle morning sunlight, and there was something rather familiar about the unfamiliarity.

This…was Huo Wujiu's room. What had happened…?

Hit by another dizzy spell, Jiang Suizhou lowered his head and braced a hand against his forehead for a few seconds. Slowly, he managed to recover scattered bits and pieces of the previous night.

He was drinking here in Huo Wujiu's room last night. However, the liquor was more potent than expected, and this body of his had poor alcohol tolerance to begin with. As a result, he ended up utterly inebriated halfway through.

No matter how hard he racked his brain, though, the second half of the night remained a mystery.

He couldn't remember what had happened after that, but apparently it resulted in him…taking Huo Wujiu's bed…?

In his woozy state, he heard someone open the door of the bedroom's inner chamber and looked up to see Huo Wujiu push himself into the main room. He must've been washing up just now, judging by the glistening film of moisture that still clung to his skin.

"Awake?" Huo Wujiu asked.

Jiang Suizhou looked over at him. Even though Huo Wujiu was expressionless, he seemed relaxed and energized, and he sat with perfect posture in the wheelchair. Meanwhile, Jiang Suizhou lay slumped in bed, leaning listlessly against the headboard. He couldn't explain it, but something was just a little off about this scene.

"I drank too much yesterday. I didn't even realize I spent the night here," Jiang Suizhou said, rubbing his temple.

Huo Wujiu cast him an unreadable look. "It's fine."

Then he propelled himself to the outer room and called for Meng Qianshan.

Meng Qianshan had been keeping watch outside the entire night. At Huo Wujiu's summons, he quickly entered the room and began bustling around, arranging for servants to bring in the long-prepared hangover tea.

Once Jiang Suizhou drank the tea under Meng Qianshan's attentive care, his lightheadedness finally abated, and he got up and changed into new robes. After that, Li Changning came into the room with Wei Kai.

They were both taken aback when they saw him sitting on Huo Wujiu's bed sipping tea. Immediately, Li Changning ducked his head and feigned ignorance. He didn't forget to tug at Wei Kai's sleeve to encourage him to stop his ogling and follow suit.

Eventually, Li Changning approached cautiously and bowed.

“Your humble servant couldn’t find Your Highness in the main hall earlier. I didn’t expect Your Highness to be here in Madam’s room.”

“No harm done,” Jiang Suizhou replied. “If no adjustments need to be made to the dosage today, you can have someone start preparing it now.”

Li Changning responded affirmatively.

Jiang Suizhou stood with Meng Qianshan’s help. He was still feeling quite woozy as he rose, and he nearly lost his balance.

Seems like I need to catch up on some sleep after all, he thought.

“Do whatever it is you need to do,” he instructed, waving a hand dismissively. “I’m leaving.”

Li Changning and Wei Kai hastily stepped aside and bowed again to respectfully see off the Prince of Jing.

Jiang Suizhou nodded at Huo Wujiu before turning and departing.

His footsteps were so unsteady he almost seemed to be floating as he walked out. The door slid shut behind him, leaving only three people in the room, per usual.

Wei Kai instantly raised his head and stared outside vigilantly. Once Jiang Suizhou was sufficiently far away, he promptly shot Huo Wujiu a horrified look.

“General, did he…?!”

Huo Wujiu could tell what he was thinking with a single glance.

“Don’t be foolish,” he said, frowning.

At that, Wei Kai let out a sigh of relief.

Although he wasn’t too familiar with the ways of the world, the Prince of Jing’s haggard appearance still sent alarm bells clanging in his

head.

After all, what other reason could there be? Why else would this cut-sleeve prince spend the night in the general's room—and look even worse for wear than usual to boot?

Was it possible that he really did do…*something* with the general last night?

Fortunately, he could stop worrying about it. The general essentially told him just now that it was all in his head, which meant that everything was fine.

After his initial shock subsided, Wei Kai relaxed at last. His tense nerves loosened—as did his tongue.

"Your subordinate knew that couldn't be the case. How absurd to think someone like you could be the same as him!"

He looked up at his general with shining eyes. Unexpectedly, Huo Wujiu's own gaze turned ice-cold upon hearing his words, and Wei Kai froze under its intensity.

General Huo furrowed his brow. "Watch your mouth."

Wei Kai sealed his lips at once and nodded obediently.

Huo Wujiu pushed himself up from the wheelchair and walked slowly toward the edge of the bed. After tactfully retreating to the side, Wei Kei pulled out the medicine sachet that Li Changning had brought and began brewing the decoction.

He was well aware that he had just misspoken, which in turn had angered the general.

A bemused expression took over his face.

He hadn’t said anything untrue, so what exactly was the general so mad about?

Meanwhile, in the main room of Anyin Hall, Meng Qianshan helped Jiang Suizhou gingerly lie down on the bed to rest a bit longer.

He had grown accustomed to his own bed and slept rather poorly in Huo Wujiu’s last night. He hadn’t expected Huo Wujiu’s bed to be firm enough for his back to ache after lying on it all night.

Meng Qianshan attended to Jiang Suizhou while he ate, then lowered the bed curtains for him. Confusion still lingered heavily in Jiang Suizhou’s mind. After a long moment of contemplation, he finally decided to put to voice his puzzlement.

“How did I end up sleeping there yesterday?”

Meng Qianshan let out an exclamation of surprise.

“Your Highness, how would your servant know the answer to that?” he replied, exasperated. “Your servant waited outside the room until around midnight, when Madam Huo finally came to the door to say you were going to sleep there.”

“Madam Huo said that?” Jiang Suizhou asked incredulously, his brow wrinkling in confusion.

Meng Qianshan nodded. “Your Highness doesn’t remember?”

Jiang Suizhou paused for a long moment before he let out a quiet “mm” in resignation.

“I drank too much,” he muttered, “so indeed, it…doesn’t ring a bell, really.”

Meng Qianshan gave a gentle hum of understanding.

Then Jiang Suizhou paused and added, “But…”

“But what?” Meng Qianshan prodded.

Frowning, Jiang Suizhou sank into thought without bothering to answer.

Based on what Meng Qianshan said, it appeared that he had proactively requested to stay the night in Huo Wujiu’s quarters…but he didn’t remember saying such a thing. On the contrary, he only had a vague memory of the room spinning as a pair of arms wrapped firmly around him and then deposited him gently onto that bed, not allowing for any objections.

At the same time, those memories felt more like something from a dream. But trying to think too deeply about it only worsened the throbbing pain in his head, and he soon gave up.

“Never mind, it’s not important,” he murmured, massaging his temples.

Maybe it was all in his head after all. There was just no way—Huo Wujiu couldn’t stand, let alone walk.

Moreover, even if he could, why would he carry Jiang Suizhou?

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Despite having already confirmed that Jiang Suizhou was severely ill, Jiang Shunheng refused to grow complacent. Every so often, he sent the imperial physician to check Jiang Suizhou’s condition.

Thankfully, Gu Changyun's medicine was highly effective. The onset of the symptoms came like a landslide, and the household doctors and imperial physicians alike found themselves completely stumped by it. After its peak, the effects of the medicine subsided bit by bit until it eventually leveled out into a more manageable state. His pulse still seemed to be weak and his body frail, but he was still capable of going about his daily life.

Consequently, even if the emperor assigned an imperial physician with top-level medical expertise to Jiang Suizhou, the physician wouldn't be able to notice anything amiss, at least for some time.

Over the past few days, the imperial physician returned to the emperor and reported that the Prince of Jing had mostly recovered, but the illness had caused fundamental harm to his body. There were currently several folk healers of unknown origin staying in the residence, helping to nurse him back to full health.

Except there hadn't been any improvement in his condition at all.

The emperor was extremely delighted to hear this update.

"He'll truly turn to anyone in a time of need," he remarked lazily.

The imperial physician swiftly agreed.

"Well then, since he's more or less recovered, he should come into the palace to visit me," the emperor continued. "That way, I can remind him that the Imperial Academy of Medicine has all the physicians he could possibly require—why place his trust in whatever strange heresy exists out there?"

Understanding his implication, the nearby eunuch instantly stepped forward with a subservient smile, asking the emperor when he planned to invite the Prince of Jing to the palace, so the eunuch could issue the decree.

The emperor could certainly use some amusement, as he had been in a rather low mood as of late.

And his greatest source of amusement was seeing how sick Jiang Suizhou was, and from there, speculating when this sickly brother of his would most likely die.

As a result, Jiang Suizhou entered the palace a few days later.

Between the intended effects of the medicine and the unintended consequences of getting himself blackout drunk recently, he appeared to be exceptionally weak and terribly pallid. When he walked into the palace that day, he undeniably looked even more fragile than usual.

As an imperial prince, his ceremonial robes were pitch-black and made of luxurious, flowing fabric that engulfed his gaunt frame and only served to make him seem thinner and paler in comparison.

He wobbled unsteadily as he knelt before the emperor. It looked as if he might topple over at the slightest breeze.

His appearance, the emperor noted, was rather similar to his beguiling concubine mother when she was on the cusp of death.

Not long after their father, the previous emperor, collapsed en route to the southern lands, that wicked concubine had also fallen ill. The instant the previous emperor died, Jiang Shunheng ordered for her to be imprisoned and forbade anyone from attending to her—including imperial physicians who might treat her illness.

The current emperor visited her once shortly before her death. Her seductive, bewitching face had become gaunt, her eyes sunken and her skin waxen. Her former smug, pampered appearance quickly wilted. By the end, she was a husk of the woman she used to be.

The sight of her like that had brought immense satisfaction to the emperor.

Now, her son seemed to be following in her footsteps.

Delighted, the last emperor asked Jiang Suizhou about his health with thinly disguised contempt.

Jiang Suizhou knew this day would come, so he'd prepared for it well in advance. He made himself appear as sickly as possible before feebly offering a few perfunctory responses.

Sure enough, this pleased the last emperor greatly.

It made the emperor so happy, in fact, that he was even willing to let him go early. A bit before noon, the emperor felt he'd had his fill of joy for now, and he dismissed Jiang Suizhou with a leisurely wave.

Jiang Suizhou clambered to his feet. Just as he moved to bow, the emperor spoke again.

"Since you've recovered, Wudi, why don't you resume your duties at the Ministry of Rites?" he said with a smile. "Without Wudi at the Ministry of Rites, I feel quite uneasy."

Like hell you're uneasy.

Jiang Suizhou's role was one of little responsibility; his contribution made no difference. The last emperor was deliberately making him return to work in the hopes that Jiang Suizhou's poor health, as indicated by his wan complexion, would lead to further exhaustion and shave several more years off his life.

It was fortuitous that this was exactly what Jiang Suizhou wanted.

His back-and-forth with Pang Shao had caused Pang Shao to suffer a few significant losses, and he would undoubtedly grow more vigilant. To stay adequately informed about his movements, Jiang Suizhou would need to once again be active in the court.

With that in mind, Jiang Suizhou proceeded to act troubled by this request, and he attempted to decline under a mask of false civility. Ultimately, driven by the last emperor's emphatic command, he reluctantly agreed to end his leave of absence.

The emperor's increased glee was evident.

Only then did Jiang Suizhou finally withdraw. On his way out, he glimpsed movement in his peripheral vision—the emperor casually kicked his legs up to rest them lazily on the table, a triumphant expression on his face.

Jiang Suizhou averted his gaze emotionlessly.

Empress Dowager Pang truly was shortsighted—as expected of someone from the same family as Pang Shao. Through her scheming and plotting, she ensured that her son would grow up loathing the imperial concubines competing with her for the emperor's favor and encouraged him to find amusement in harming or killing his brothers.

She taught him to play these most vicious of games, and yet she never once thought to teach him how to actually rule as emperor.

Foolishly, she assumed that her family's dynasty would last for many generations to come. For as long as they had Pang Shao supporting the future of the court, there was nothing more to worry about.

Truly, they only had themselves to blame.

The sun gradually rose ever higher in the sky as Jiang Suizhou strode out of the main hall, still deep in thought. He needed return to his residence as soon as possible to make some plans with Xu Du and Gu Changyun.

That was when he spotted someone approaching from the sprawling plaza before him.

He paced forward briskly, most likely headed for the main hall where the emperor currently sat. A eunuch followed at his side, trotting to keep up as he pleaded with him, looking distressed.

“Grand Chancellor, Grand Chancellor! Please turn back. His Majesty is occupied right now—he likely doesn’t have time to see you…”

Jiang Suizhou stopped on the spot, and his entire body tensed, on high alert.

Walking toward him was Pang Shao.

Chapter 57

THIS WAS JIANG SUIZHOU'S second time coming face-to-face with Pang Shao since he transmigrated here. They'd exchanged a few shots at this point and could now be considered fairly well acquainted with each other.

With this experience at his back, Jiang Suizhou knew that the only reason he currently had the upper hand was mere luck, because he had come from the future.

The man in front of him was an extremely troublesome and formidable opponent.

Gazing at Pang Shao from afar, he took a deep breath and forced himself to remain calm as he slowly walked forward.

When they were only three to five paces apart, Jiang Suizhou came to a stop. As the sun beat down on them, he haughtily looked down at Pang Shao, his lips curled in the hint of a smile.

Pang Shao bowed and cupped his hands in greeting, a pleasant expression on his face.

"Prince of Jing, this humble official greets Your Highness," Pang Shao said.

Jiang Suizhou watched him for a moment, smiling faintly. He remained silent until even the eunuch nearby started to panic a little.

"No need for such formalities, Grand Chancellor," he said finally.

Pang Shao straightened. Jiang Suizhou looked him up and down in appraisal.

“Why have you come to the palace today, Minister Pang?” he asked meaningfully. “Has Huangxiong summoned you?”

“Your Highness, I merely have some trivial matters that I would like to present to His Majesty,” Pang Shao replied in an agreeable tone.

Jiang Suizhou laughed lightly.

“What else is there for you to discuss, Grand Chancellor? Perhaps you’d be better off saving your breath. I must say, I fear Huangxiong may not wish to see you.”

Pang Shao looked up at Jiang Suizhou, who gazed back at him with a smile and undisguised delight in his misfortune.

“Although I’ve been bedridden in my residence as of late, I’ve heard a few murmurings regarding you, Grand Chancellor,” he continued languidly, an undeniable trace of smug satisfaction in his voice. “To think someone as outstanding and adept as the Grand Chancellor would also have moments of blunder.”

Pang Shao forced himself to chuckle a little. “Pardon my folly, Your Highness.”

Unbeknownst to Pang Shao, Jiang Suizhou’s hands were already thoroughly coated in a thin layer of sweat, hidden in his sleeves.

This act he was putting on was necessary to dispel Pang Shao’s suspicions and enforce the assumption that Jiang Suizhou was merely rejoicing in his bad fortune—not that he was the one who instigated it. Otherwise, he would undoubtedly find himself Pang Shao’s next target, and with Jiang Suizhou’s current limited scope of power, he wouldn’t be able to handle Pang Shao directly.

As the gears in his head churned at lightning speed, Jiang Suizhou echoed his laughter.

“I must give my thanks to you, Grand Chancellor. Look! Upon hearing such wonderful news about you, I have more or less recovered from my illness.”

“I’ll take the credit where credit is due,” Pang Shao responded evenly.

Jiang Suizhou nodded, still smiling. Then he turned to the side and gestured to encourage Pang Shao to continue on his way, sweeping his hand out.

“I’ll let you go, Grand Chancellor,” he said. “It’s best if you don’t tarry here any longer. Should Huangxiong lose his temper with you, it could take quite a while to abate.”

Pang Shao bowed to him once more and walked past as Jiang Suizhou’s sidelong glance followed him momentarily.

His concealed hands trembled almost uncontrollably.

Pang Shao may have worn the mask of a perfectly amiable and upstanding official, but Jiang Suizhou knew the soul that lay beneath was extremely perceptive and mercilessly cruel.

Carefully controlling the speed of his footsteps, he slowly made his way out of the palace.

Behind him, Pang Shao turned around after ten or so steps and glanced impassively at Jiang Suizhou’s retreating figure.

That encounter had gone rather differently than Pang Shao had expected.

Once his plot against Qi Min was exposed, he grew certain that Jiang Suizhou was behind what happened with Zhao Dunting. He immediately sent his subordinates to search for any evidence left behind in Zhao Dunting's residence, but they were all ruthlessly killed by incredibly skilled assassins, with no corpse to be found.

Pang Shao had the Prince of Jing's residence under constant surveillance. Although he couldn't extend his reach into the prince's personal quarters, he was confident that the prince didn't have the ability to orchestrate this feat.

After all, it had cost Pang Shao a pretty penny to train his shadow guards in secret. The Prince of Jing had never been particularly affluent, and he had also been hindered at every turn. Even cultivating a few elite guards would be a nigh impossible task, let alone ones that could contend with Pang Shao's.

Still, while this incident appeared to have unfolded naturally and inevitably, it actually created some friction between him and the emperor—the greatest beneficiary of which was the Prince of Jing.

Therefore, he assumed he hadn't been careful enough with his plans, and the prince caught wind of them.

However, considering the way the Prince of Jing had behaved just now, Pang Shao's conviction in that assumption wavered.

In a way, he had watched the Prince of Jing grow up, and he was well aware that the prince wasn't capable of such shrewdness. It would have been impossible for him to act so flawlessly composed and nonchalant in front of Pang Shao if he truly had killed Pang Shao's shadow guards.

“Grand Chancellor?” the eunuch said cautiously, seeing Pang Shao come to a stop.

Pang Shao paused for a moment longer, then glanced at him calmly.

“It’s nothing.”

He turned back around and continued toward the main hall.

Pang Shao had never been fond of guessing games. The best way of dealing with anything—or anyone—particularly unpredictable was to crush them swiftly and brutally, even at the risk of civilian collateral.

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Once Huo Wujiu regained the ability to stand, his recovery continued in leaps and bounds. In less than a week, he could once again move around with ease.

Wei Kai was so thrilled that his eyes brimmed with tears.

One day, after another session of acupuncture and medical treatment concluded, Li Changning and Wei Kai tightly closed all the windows and doors in Huo Wujiu’s quarters so he could take a few laps around the room.

“It won’t be long before your legs are completely healed, General!” Li Changning announced with joy. “From now on, your servant merely has to prepare some daily tonics to warm and strengthen your tendons. Within a month, you’ll be able to ride a horse and use qinggong[7] again!”

Lowering his head, Huo Wujiu looked down at his legs and made a quiet noise of agreement.

While Li Changning turned to tidy up the medicine chest, Wei Kai approached Huo Wujiu and leaned in conspiratorially.

“General, our comrades out in the city have received news from Great Liang.”

Huo Wujiu jerked his gaze up. “Tell me.”

“The messenger pigeon brought news from the general defending the northern bank of the Yangtze River,” Wei Kai reported swiftly, keeping his voice low. “He said that as soon as you are able to walk again, he will come to meet us at the river. Our men only have to escort you to the riverbank, and he will take care of everything else from that point on.”

At this point, Wei Kai stopped to laugh.

“Once your legs are healed, General, who could possibly capture you again? What’s more, they all think you’ve been permanently maimed. If you catch them off guard, you’ll undoubtedly make quick work of it.”

Huo Wujiu fell silent for a moment.

“The general defending Jiangbei? Where’s Wu Qianfan?” he asked.

The person originally assigned to guard Jiangbei was Wu Qianfan, whom the former marquis had taken in alongside Wei Kai.

Wei Kai faltered, and his smile slowly faded.

“Qianfan…is dead,” he said.

Huo Wujiu lifted his gaze to see Wei Kai pause, his glistening eyes rimmed in red. He pressed his lips together briefly before continuing in a quiet voice.

“The other general said that Qianfan was pierced by a stray arrow the day you were crossing the river, General. They couldn’t save him.”

Wei Kai had grown up with Wu Qianfan, and it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say Wu Qianfan was like a brother to him. When he had failed to arrive with reinforcements, resulting in the enemy capturing General Huo after they crossed the river, Wei Kai had even resented him a little for his slipup. He never could've imagined that in reality, it was because Wu Qianfan had died…

Huo Wujiu sank into silence.

Dead…?

Wu Qianfan was one of Huo Wujiu's most capable subordinates; Huo Wujiu was even closer to him than he was to Wei Kai. Naturally, he should have felt sorrow upon learning of his passing, yet…

Truthfully, he'd been harboring some suspicions for a while now.

Had Wu Qianfan been executed for military incompetence, that might have been somewhat reasonable. However, given the vast width of the Yangtze River, a stray arrow couldn't possibly have reached the opposite shore, even with intense fighting on the riverbank. For Wu Qianfan to have been struck by an arrow, it had to have occurred while he was leading the troops across the river.

But if that was the case, Huo Wujiu would still have received at least some of his reinforcements.

So, if Wu Qianfan died unexpectedly…that meant he must have been silenced.

With a proper execution, he would've been detained and investigated beforehand. The only way to prevent him from spilling any secrets whatsoever was to arrange an "accidental" death.

"Who is currently stationed in Jiangbei?" Huo Wujiu asked.

“Li Sheng—I’m not that familiar with him. He’s a former subordinate of His Highness, the Crown Prince,” Wei Kai said.

It wasn’t a surprise for Huo Wujiu’s men to be replaced by the crown prince’s upon death. After all, Huo Wujiu wasn’t even in Great Liang anymore. Of course the crown prince needed to personally take up the matter of appointing generals, and it stood to reason that he would choose someone he was better acquainted with on a personal level.

Perhaps if Jiang Suizhou hadn’t shown him the forged letter bearing the crown prince’s personal seal, Huo Wujiu would still have believed that.

He didn’t respond immediately.

Even if his cousin was in the clear, something was unquestionably amiss with his cousin’s subordinates. Therefore, the general defending the riverbank couldn’t be trusted fully.

Typically, Huo Wujiu wouldn’t hesitate to march ahead upon discovering something of this magnitude, nor would he have anything to fear.

After all, little had actually, materially changed for the troops stationed next to the river—only the officer-in-charge. Even if the general was truly plotting to kill him at the riverbank, he’d have to consider the soldiers under his command and where their true loyalties lay. It was hard to say for certain who the victor would be.

Then again, as long as Huo Wujiu came prepared to take action the very instant in which this person attempted to cut him down, it wouldn’t be difficult to turn the tables and obtain the evidence needed to strike back.

However…

Although his eyes were fixed on his legs, a person quickly took up residence in his mind.

This person had requested his protection in the name of collaboration. Should he escape on his own, this person would end up being punished in his stead, charged with the crime of releasing a prisoner.

However, if he took this person with him…

First of all, he was frail and untrained in combat, making him something of a liability. It would be difficult to protect him when flanked by troops. Second, he was a member of Southern Jing's imperial family. If Huo Wujiu recklessly brought him back to Northern Liang, just where would that leave him? How would he get by?

Naturally, a spoiled, sickly prince who had lived all his life in absolute comfort couldn't live as a prisoner.

Huo Wujiu was the type of person who always chose the most direct route—the one that was most likely to succeed. He seldom cared about the consequences or risks.

Yet now, all because of one man, he found himself paralyzed by indecision and driven by caution.

For his sake, Huo Wujiu was willing to give up the easy way out.

Huo Wujiu remained deep in thought for some time, and Wei Kai grew puzzled at his reticence.

"General?"

General Huo was obviously upset hearing the news of Wu Qianfan's death, but even so, they had to focus on the bigger picture. Contact with the

general guarding Great Liang's river border had finally been established. Why was General Huo hesitating?

After a long bout of silence, Huo Wujiu slowly spoke.

"Let's bide our time for now," he said. "Don't breathe a word of my recovery to anyone—tell them my legs can't be healed, but make sure to stay in communication with them. Pass every letter to me so I can read over the contents. I'll write responses personally."

Wei Kai gaped at him.

"General?"

His general glanced out the window, as though he had heard something.

In the distance, the Prince of Jing's retinue had arrived in front of Anyin Hall. The prince stepped down from the palanquin, clad in layered ceremonial dress.

His general stared at the prince for a few seconds before he walked straight over to the bed, hopped nimbly onto it, and tugged the blanket up over himself. Fleet-footed just a moment earlier, he was now sitting listlessly on the bed, as if his legs couldn't move at all.

He even picked up the book next to the bed and started flipping through it.

"The Prince of Jing is back. Hurry—pack your things and get out of here," he said.

Wei Kai stepped toward him, too anxious to pay attention to anything else.

"But General, why…?"

“Because I want to take someone with me.”

And that was all the explanation his general would give.

Chapter 58

WHEN JIANG SUIZHOU stepped into Huo Wujiu's room, he found the man sitting on the bed, reading as usual.

As soon as he entered, Meng Qianshan tactfully took his outer robe from him and withdrew from the room.

Jiang Suizhou headed straight for Huo Wujiu's bedroom and sat down on the edge of his bed. Just as Huo Wujiu lowered the book in his hands, he saw Jiang Suizhou look him up and down with a concerned frown.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I feel like there hasn't been any improvement in your complexion, despite the many days of treatment thus far."

Huo Wujiu paused before nonchalantly averting his gaze and changing the subject.

"Jiang Shunheng summoned you to the palace?" he asked.

Jiang Suizhou chuckled and picked up Huo Wujiu's discarded book, idly leafing through the pages.

"Yes," he said, smiling. "There's been no shortage of imperial physicians coming by the residence these days. Now that I've recovered somewhat, he naturally has to verify with his own eyes how close I am to death."

He stared down at the book as he spoke, and he couldn't stop himself from sighing softly.

His health prior to transmigrating had been perfect; he'd never known what it was like to be chronically ill. Even though he had been here for quite a while now, and he'd done everything in his power to change his fate of being killed by Huo Wujiu, there was little he could do about this inherently sickly body of his. Most likely, he'd never be entirely healthy.

Who knew how much longer he even had left to live?

At that moment, Huo Wujiu spoke.

"I won't let anything happen to you."

Jiang Suizhou looked up, surprised to see Huo Wujiu gazing at him with a remarkably earnest expression.

He burst out laughing.

"Of course," he said. "As long as I remain under the protection of General Huo, what do I have to fear? Even if Jiang Shunheng were old friends with the king of the underworld, he wouldn't be able to convince him to take my life."

Assuming that Huo Wujiu was joking around with him, he'd responded in kind. After all, it was easy to prevent someone from being killed, but it was much harder to save them from illness.

However, Jiang Suizhou always took things in stride. He planned to deal with the circumstances as they arose.

He didn't notice the way Huo Wujiu's lips shifted almost imperceptibly, as though he was forcibly holding himself back from saying something more.

"Anyway," Jiang Suizhou said, barreling past his own quip, "I happened to encounter Pang Shao today."

Huo Wujiu watched him quietly, waiting for him to continue.

“I ran into him on my way out of the palace. I presume he came of his own accord—I can’t imagine His Majesty wished to see him, and a young eunuch kept pace with him the entire time, trying to persuade him otherwise.”

Huo Wujiu nodded. “Did you talk to him?”

“I did.” Jiang Suizhou laughed. “Needless to say, I pretended to be completely oblivious and made a few mocking remarks, playing up the character of someone reveling in his newfound superiority.”

Huo Wujiu gave a faint hum in lieu of a response, but the hint of a smile tugged at his lips as he looked over at Jiang Suizhou.

Jiang Suizhou found himself briefly dazed at the sight. The man rarely smiled, but every time he did, it was dazzling. To behold even the slightest hint of a smile was like being bathed in radiant light.

Disoriented, he almost stumbled over his next words.

“Wh-what is it?” he asked, somewhat haltingly.

“Oh, nothing. It just brought to mind the performance you gave at the palace banquet. As I recall, you’re quite a remarkable actor.”

Slightly mortified, Jiang Suizhou was left momentarily speechless. An embarrassed blush spread over his face.

Even if Huo Wujiu tactfully avoided saying it outright, they both knew what he was referring to. How could either of them forget that terrifying night, when he’d had no choice but to act like a complete pervert in front of Pang Shao?

He truly never expected that one day, Huo Wujiu would joke around about this with him.

After the initial wave of embarrassment subsided, Jiang Suizhou began to see the humor in the situation. Clearing his throat, he leveled a look at Huo Wujiu and assumed an overwrought, imperious attitude.

“Madam Huo,” he said, sneering dramatically. “As you should know by now, I’m not fond of those who grow arrogant because of my favor.”

Huo Wujiu knew Jiang Suizhou was joking, just as he knew he was supposed to respond with laughter.

But for some reason, he didn’t find it particularly funny. Something about the prince’s haughty demeanor and contemptuous eyes caused Huo Wujiu’s chest to tighten, and even his blood vessels seemed to tingle.

Swallowing hard, he instinctively began reciting meditation mantras in his head.

Jiang Suizhou was, of course, unaware of the predicament he’d caused. After laughing a little, he grew serious again and shifted the subject slightly.

“That being said, I was mulling over something on my way back from the palace today.”

“What were you thinking about?” Huo Wujiu asked stiffly, forcibly calming himself down.

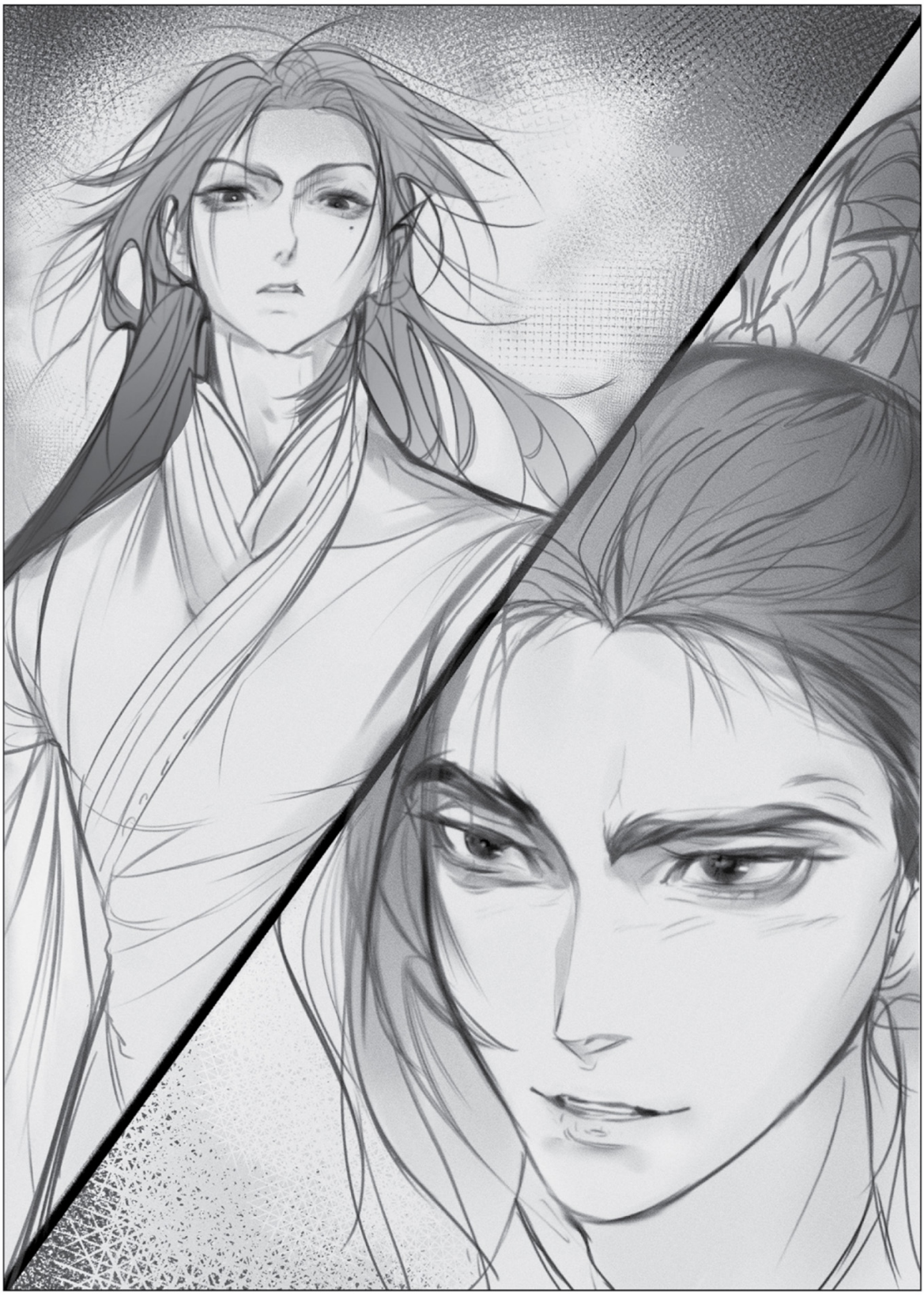
“At present, some discord has been sown between Jiang Shunheng and Pang Shao—that much is undeniable,” Jiang Suizhou replied slowly. “But will the day come when they reconcile once more?”

Huo Wujiu was silent for a moment. “Undoubtedly.”

Jiang Suizhou nodded.

“I believe so as well,” he said. “Firstly, Jiang Shunheng is rather simpleminded, and he’s been coddled since childhood by Pang Shao and Empress Dowager Pang. His trust in them is deeply rooted and genuine. Secondly, although these recent incidents are proof that Pang Shao had deceived the emperor, nothing he did actually threatened Jiang Shunheng’s spot on the throne. It’s only a matter of time before Pang Shao gets back on his good side.”

Huo Wujiu made a noise of agreement. “What are you planning to do?”



“Three feet of ice does not freeze in a single day—it’s impossible to accomplish anything overnight. This period of time will give us some room to breathe while expanding our influence and simultaneously suppressing the Pang faction. That’s already more than enough. After this…we’ll have to counter the moves as they come.”

“Mm,” Huo Wujiu intoned. “Just tell me how I can help.”

Jiang Suizhou nodded, deep in thought.

As Huo Wujiu slowly withdrew his gaze, a trace of something complicated flitted through his eyes.

Jiang Suizhou’s analysis was correct.

It was true that Pang Shao would succeed in regaining the emperor’s trust sooner or later, but what would be the easiest way for him to do so?

Huo Wujiu glanced at Jiang Suizhou again.

Obviously, it would be to target this deeply disliked Prince of Jing.

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As expected, over the next few weeks, Pang Shao made use of every trick in the book.

Shamelessly, he offered up an endless parade of rare treasures, jewels, and beautiful women from across the land as tribute, each gift more exquisite than the last.

Jiang Suizhou heard the rumors flow through the Ministry of Rites. Sure enough, the last emperor was reportedly relenting.

The process was gradual—the first signs of concession came when he stopped turning Pang Shao away at the door when the minister came to request an audience. Instead, he'd meet with him one or two times out of five. As time progressed, he eventually agreed to see Pang Shao each time he entered the palace. These days, he'd even begun to once again summon him of his own accord.

Everyone in the court knew that the Grand Chancellor was truly the emperor's most favored official. Despite the magnitude of his mistakes, His Majesty still couldn't bear to censure him.

Which meant that as long as His Majesty was on the throne, not much could threaten the Grand Chancellor's position.

These were all part of Jiang Suizhou's observations as well.

It was inevitable. Jiang Shunheng had grown up sheltered in the inner palace, where the adults around him indulged his every whim without question. Even though he was now in his thirties, of course he continued to behave like a spoiled child seeking instant gratification.

Nevertheless, the Pang faction had still been dealt a significant blow during this period.

For starters, the emperor's falling out with Pang Shao resulted in the ousting of quite a few of the Pang faction's core members. These positions were filled by scholars of more humble origin, under Qi Min's recommendation. Not only that, all of the Pang faction officials left in the court had been threatened into behaving, to some extent. They seemed to be a little too anxious to be as brazen as they had in the past.

After all, the truth was laid plainly before them: Every single one of them was expendable. The Grand Chancellor was eminent in his own right,

unaffected by any trial or tribulation, and absolutely ruthless the moment something went wrong. Lower-ranking officials would be killed or removed from their positions at the drop of a hat, and no one would protect them.

Thus, while they still served Pang Shao and attempted to curry favor with him as they always had, they knew to devise contingency plans for themselves. If Pang Shao couldn't—or wouldn't—protect them in the event of trouble, then they had no choice but to come up with alternate methods of self-preservation.

For some time, the imperial court appeared to exhibit a certain semblance of virtue and harmony, as though it had been refreshed with new blood.

Qi Min also seemed to realize that this was all related to Jiang Suizhou.

Following Jiang Suizhou's first appearance in the morning assembly upon returning from his convalescence, Qi Min sought him out and invited him to his residence for a few drinks, as a way of extending his gratitude.

Jiang Suizhou knew he couldn't go.

Previously, Qi Min hadn't been well liked by the last emperor, but he had since gained some trust as a result of the incident with Pang Shao—a blessing in disguise in its own way. As long as this was the case, Jiang Suizhou had to be careful to keep his distance from the minister. If he became "contaminated" by Jiang Suizhou's goodwill, Qi Min would lose every single scrap of trust he'd gained.

For this reason, Jiang Suizhou responded accordingly.

"I must say, I have no idea what Minister Qi is thanking me for." Jiang Suizhou looked at Qi Min with a thin smile. He spoke softly, but he

wasn’t being polite in the slightest.

Then he purposefully raised his voice, allowing all the nearby officials to hear him loud and clear.

“Simply take care of your own responsibilities, Minister Qi. As you know, the river water does not affect that of the well. Let us each mind our business. I advise you not to provoke me.”

He stalked away with a flick of his sleeves.

As anticipated, news of their conversation soon made its way to Jiang Shunheng. The emperor didn’t say anything outright, but he began to regard Qi Min even more favorably.

Meanwhile, discussions about the Prince of Jing’s disrespectful, ill-mannered behavior ran rampant through the court.

A good number of officials also complained directly to Qi Min.

He paid them no mind. But one day, as he took a moment of rest in between taking care of court-related affairs alone in his study, he let out a long sigh.

“If only the Prince of Jing had been born a few years earlier, perhaps I would have a chance to see Yecheng’s city walls again in this lifetime.”

Naturally, Jiang Suizhou was not privy to Qi Min’s thoughts, nor was he able to take note of any of this. Instead, he focused on the court, quietly waiting for something to unfold.

It wasn’t long before Pang Shao made his move.

The emperor had always been fond of hunting, and he often enjoyed excursions to the fertile mountains and grasslands around Yecheng, less than thirty miles from the city. When the capital was moved to Lin’an, Pang

Shao spent a considerable amount of energy locating a suitable hunting grounds replacement, which he finally found in Tianping Mountain.

But the costs associated with getting the new capital on its feet were prohibitive—building the imperial palace, supporting the army, and so on. To make matters worse, the south was also plagued by banditry. Consequently, this task was delayed again and again.

Now, as he maneuvered to get back in Jiang Shunheng's good graces, Pang Shao suddenly poured a substantial portion of his personal funds into a large-scale construction project, thereby allowing the imperial hunting grounds to be completed almost two years ahead of schedule.

After countless delays, Pang Shao managed to wrap up the entire project in less than a month and stocked it with plenty of birds and beasts.

As soon as the morning assembly commenced the very next day, he informed the emperor of the news.

Unsurprisingly, the emperor was beyond pleased. Since summer was just around the corner, he said that he simply had to partake in a hunt before the days grew too hot. After some discussion with Pang Shao, he settled on a date in two weeks' time.

It was obvious to Jiang Suizhou why Pang Shao was in such a rush.

Several days ago, news of victory had arrived in the capital. General Lou had quelled the southern bandits, and he was set to withdraw his troops and return in triumph to Lin'an once he finished clearing out the residual troublemakers.

If Qi Min could be considered a thorn in Pang Shao's side, then Lou Yue was a blade buried to the hilt.

Southern Jing sorely lacked military talent, but for what it was worth, Lou Yue was easily Southern Jing's top general. He had a short temper, and though he constantly challenged Pang Shao quite openly, Pang Shao could never do anything about it.

Unfortunately for Pang Shao, Lou Yue was exactly the sort of person he found hardest to handle.

That was why he had to get back on the emperor's good side prior to Lou Yue's return to the court. Only then would Pang Shao have the peace of mind to deal with him.

Even after Jiang Suizhou left the assembly, he remained lost in thought for a long time. He returned to the residence and went to visit Huo Wujiu, still deeply pondering. For a good while after arriving in Huo Wujiu's quarters, he didn't speak.

"What's on your mind?" Huo Wujiu asked, sitting in bed.

"I'm considering who to bring to the hunt at Tianping Mountain."

Jiang Suizhou took a seat on the bed beside him and immediately launched into his analysis.

"When the emperor embarks on a hunt with his court officials, their family members are typically brought along as well. I've already consulted with Gu Changyun and Xu Du, and they both expressed concerns about my safety. They agreed Xu Du should join me—despite his gentle appearance, he knows some martial arts, you know—but…should Xu Du leave the capital, Gu Changyun might not be able to control Xu Du's men."

Jiang Suizhou sighed.

"I should have taken in a few more advisors, to avoid being caught shorthanded," he murmured to himself.

Unbeknownst to him, Huo Wujiu’s eyes darkened slightly. The room fell quiet for a moment, and then seemingly out of nowhere, Huo Wujiu’s clear voice abruptly cut through the air.

“I’ll go with you.”

Chapter 59

“WHAT?” Jiang Suizhou said, startled.

“You’re telling me you’re obligated to go on this hunting expedition, aren’t you? I’ll come with you.”

Logically, Jiang Suizhou knew right away that Huo Wujiu’s proposal wasn’t feasible. He’d been advised to bring Xu Du as a bodyguard, in case Pang Shao intended to bring harm to him during the hunt. Huo Wujiu couldn’t even stand at the moment. What protection could he provide if things went wrong?

But oddly enough, he couldn’t bring himself to refuse.

In fact, he was even a little tempted.

He’d grown used to having this person at his side. Even if Huo Wujiu couldn’t assist him, his presence alone gave Jiang Suizhou an inexplicable sense of security.

A moment passed before he finally managed to push down his irrational thoughts.

“But your mobility is limited,” he argued, “and Tianping Mountain is many miles away from Lin’an. It will be a long, weary journey—”

“That won’t be a problem.”

Huo Wujiu looked up at Jiang Suizhou, his expression calm.

“You’re supposed to bring your family. I count, don’t I?”

Jiang Suizhou opened his mouth, intending once again to turn him down, then closed it wordlessly.

How was he supposed to argue against that? Especially considering his earlier half-hearted counterargument already contradicted the faint anticipation bubbling inside him.

Jiang Suizhou couldn't bring himself to refuse further.

"Then…in that case," he said slowly, "make sure you take care of yourself on the way there."

***

Jiang Suizhou's schedule became increasingly busy from that day onward.

With summer gradually setting in, the last emperor's wardrobe needed to be updated. The Imperial Household Department was responsible for the creation of the new clothes, and the emperor's old spring and winter clothing was passed along to the Ministry of Rites, where they would be catalogued and stored away properly.

Since the Ministry of Rites had many other duties at the moment, this task was assigned to Jiang Suizhou.

Jiang Suizhou was well aware that there was no room for complacency when it came to the emperor's robes. It would be a great crime if one went missing under his watch. Because of Pang Shao, Jiang Suizhou approached the task with utmost care, taking everything in his own hands so Pang Shao wouldn't be able to find anything to use against him.

As a result, he neglected to visit Huo Wujiu for several days in a row.

His absence gave Wei Kai the opportunity to stay for longer stretches of time, which he used to inform Huo Wujiu of various news regarding the capital and Northern Liang.

On one such day, he learned that Huo Wujiu was going to accompany the Prince of Jing on the hunting trip.

“So this is why you weren’t in a hurry to depart yet, General!” Wei Kai said excitedly. “If we leave the capital with them, we won’t have to worry so much about the imperial guards. I’m sure they’ll be traveling with an excessively large procession too. It’ll be a piece of cake to slip away once we’re out of the city!”

“We’re not escaping,” Huo Wujiu said evenly. “Make some preparations—you’ll be disguising yourself as the servant pushing my wheelchair.”

“General?” Wei Kai said, taken aback. “But what are you planning to do there, if not escape?”

“Hunt, obviously. Is that not the purpose of a hunting trip?”

“Please don’t mess with me, General! You don’t want to use this as a chance to get away, and you’re also…”

Huo Wujiu interrupted him.

“I just have a hunch about something,” he said. “And I’ll only feel reassured if I personally attend the trip. Should my suspicions prove to be correct, you’ll understand.”

At that, Wei Kai had no choice but to shamefully fall silent.

“By the way,” Huo Wujiu added after a moment, “what’s kept the Prince of Jing so busy lately?”

“He’s organizing and storing away that rotten emperor’s imperial robes—that’s why he’s been leaving so early and returning so late these days. He seems to be worried that someone will try to tamper with the robes.”

“Has anyone attempted to?”

“Actually, yes,” Wei Kai said. “Another official in the Ministry of Rites, from the Pang family. He doesn’t hold an important position, but he’s one of Pang Shao’s nephews, born to a concubine. The Prince of Jing has his eye on him, though, and hasn’t given him any chances to meddle thus far.”

Lowering the book in his hands, Huo Wujiu mulled over something in his head.

“He must be trying to create the right circumstances for the Prince of Jing to commit—or appear to commit—a gravely disrespectful act,” he said.

Wei Kai nodded vigorously.

“Without a doubt! Your subordinate heard that the rotten emperor is a spendthrift, who only wears clothes for one season before tossing them aside. After these imperial robes are catalogued and put away, no one typically checks on them again. If one or two robes went missing and appeared in the Prince of Jing’s residence, don’t you think that would be reason enough for his head to roll?”

Wei Kai appeared to be wholly unconcerned, as though this didn’t have anything to do with him. Wrapped up in his own world, he didn’t notice his general rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

“With your skill, would it be difficult to sneak out one of the robes?” Huo Wujiu asked suddenly.

Wei Kai blinked.

“General, do you want to use that nephew to kill the Prince of Jing?”

Huo Wujiu stared at him silently. Though he said nothing, the chill that ran down Wei Kai’s spine told him he’d made another misstep.

“Your subordinate misspoke,” he said sheepishly. “Please enlighten me, General.”

Huo Wujiu withdrew his intense gaze.

“Let’s give that man a taste of his own medicine.”

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Jiang Suizhou had always known that Pang Shao’s nephew was working for him.

The Pang family was large and prosperous, with an abundance of children and grandchildren. Not only that, this particular nephew was an unfavored son of a concubine kept by Pang Shao’s elder brother. Because Pang Shao had more nephews born to legitimate wives than he could count on two hands, he didn’t pay much attention to the concubine-born ones.

Jiang Suizhou had no way of knowing whether this nephew was favored by Pang Shao or not, but he didn’t have the authority to dismiss him without any error on the man’s record. All Jiang Suizhou could do was be vigilant around him and do his best to avoid trouble.

He hadn’t expected the young man to run off and get into a mess of his own.

Not long after Huo Wujiu’s conversation with Wei Kai, Jiang Suizhou had a rather hectic day at the Ministry of Rites dealing with the aftermath. By the time he finally finished and made it back to the residence, it was already late in the evening.

He was in a bit of a daze even after returning home. He kept going over the events from earlier in the day, thinking through them again and again. They still didn’t feel real.

Subconsciously, his feet took him straight to Huo Wujiu’s quarters. Somewhere along the way, he’d developed a habit of seeking out Huo Wujiu every time something unforeseen occurred.

He arrived to find that Huo Wujiu hadn’t gone to bed yet.

“What’s wrong?” he asked when Jiang Suizhou sat down in front of him.

Jiang Suizhou raised his head and stared at him for a moment before he managed to answer.

“One of my subordinates died.”

Huo Wujiu’s eyebrow ticked up. “Who?”

“A minor official in the Ministry of Rites, named Pang Cong. He’s… one of Pang Shao’s nephews.”

Huo Wujiu understood immediately. Wei Kai had always been highly efficient when it came to executing tasks. He must have put his plan into action today.

“You’re not feeling sorry for Pang Shao, are you?” he remarked, not batting an eye.

Jiang Suizhou shook his head.

“No,” he said. “It just feels a little too bizarre, like I’m dreaming.”

He turned his gaze to Huo Wujiu. “Do you know how he died?”

Of course Huo Wujiu knew. It was his idea, after all.

However, he decided to play along.

“No, how?” he asked.

“On his way to the Grand Chancellor’s residence, the horses pulling his carriage were startled by something, and he fell to his death after being thrown out of the carriage.”

Huo Wujiu didn’t miss a beat. “Oh, so it was an accident.”

“Maybe, but in the chaos, one of the emperor’s robes fell out of the carriage—he’d stashed it away inside!” Jiang Suizhou added quickly. “Since it was the middle of the day, many people witnessed it. The whole capital’s in an uproar right now. Everyone is saying Pang Shao harbors disloyal intentions, and he plans to supersede the Jiang family.”

Huo Wujiu chuckled.

Wei Kai was as dependable as ever. From beginning to end, he’d done exactly as Huo Wujiu commanded, without leaving any evidence behind.

“What happened next?” he asked.

“His Majesty was furious, as to be expected,” Jiang Suizhou said. “He summoned Pang Shao at once to confront him. Of course Pang Shao defended himself, but His Majesty was having none of it. In the end, Pang

Shao claimed he knew nothing about what had happened, and perhaps the young man had given in to duplicitous thoughts due to his lack of favor. In order to dispel His Majesty's misgivings, he himself proposed to impose a harsh punishment upon Pang Cong's branch of the family."

Jiang Suizhou inhaled deeply.

"Today, Pang Cong's entire family was thrown in prison, including his father and brothers. Even if they don't lose their lives, they'll most likely all be dismissed from their court positions and banished to the borderlands."

Quite pleased with this outcome, Huo Wujiu smirked ever so slightly.

"Isn't that a good thing?" he asked.

"It is," Jiang Suizhou said, nodding, "but something about this just feels…strange."

He frowned, pensive.

Huo Wujiu lifted an eyebrow almost imperceptibly, rather surprised by Jiang Suizhou's reaction.

"Strange in what way?" he asked.

"Recently, Pang Shao has been running into one misfortune after another, but you and I both know that those incidents were all artificially manufactured, as I was the one pulling the strings," he said. "However, I didn't have anything to do with what took place today."

"Maybe it was a coincidence?" Huo Wujiu suggested.

Without hesitation, Jiang Suizhou shook his head.

"It can't possibly have been," he said. "So I'm wondering…just who is behind this? Who is this powerful?"

Instead of replying, Huo Wujiu listened to him quietly.

“Whoever it is must be well-informed and quick-witted, someone who acts with vicious efficiency. Dead men tell no tales, so they say—and with Pang Cong out of the way, Pang Shao’s been backed into a corner. Whoever set this up also made sure they swiftly silenced anyone that might know the truth,” Jiang Suizhou mused. “This person must be a formidable figure indeed.”

Huo Wujiu paused, then nodded in agreement.

“Stranger yet, they didn’t implicate me in the slightest,” Jiang Suizhou added, brows furrowed.

You don’t say, Huo Wujiu thought.

“This particular robe in Pang Cong’s carriage just happened to pass through his hands and his hands only. There are records of it in the Ministry of Rites—it has absolutely nothing to do with me,” Jiang Suizhou said. “This person attacked Pang Shao in such a ruthless way while coincidentally avoiding me altogether. Do you think I could be…acquainted with this person?”

Huo Wujiu’s eyebrow twitched.

Possibly more than just acquainted, he remarked to himself.

But he allowed no trace of his mischievous thoughts to show on his face; his expression remained calm and composed.

“Perhaps,” he said. “Do you have any guesses?”

Jiang Suizhou began pondering out loud.

“I’ve thought about it all afternoon, and I still don’t have a clue. There aren’t many officials in the court capable of taking a stand against

Pang Shao. General Lou isn’t in Lin’an at the moment, and his reach likely doesn’t extend this far regardless. Qi Min has the will, but I can’t imagine he’d play dirty enough to kill someone… Honestly, I really don’t know who it could be.”

He stared gravely at the wavering flame of the candle on the table, brows knitted and deep in thought. In that instant, he looked so genuinely lost that Huo Wujiu felt a bit guilty for teasing and deceiving him.

Maybe there was too much moisture permeating Jiangnan from the frequent rainfall. As time went on, it even seemed to seep into his heart, causing it to soften where it once wouldn’t have.

Sighing internally, he opened his mouth to speak—only for Jiang Suizhou to suddenly look up at him, a smile dancing in his eyes.

“In any case, no matter who it is, they must be a good person with formidable skill,” he said brightly.

He reached out and lightly patted Huo Wujiu, his touch dulled by the blanket.

“Based on all available evidence, I can only assume this person bears no ill will toward me either,” he continued. “Rest assured—should I ever find out who this person is, I will do my best to implore them to shield and protect you as well.”

After a beat of hesitation, Huo Wujiu swallowed back down what he was initially going to say.

“That…would be most wonderful,” he replied instead.

Chapter 60

ALTHOUGH JIANG SUIZHOU returned to his residence late that evening, he still came home earlier than Pang Shao.

His servants waited fearfully all night, but Pang Shao did not return from the palace until nearly dawn. As light tinged the horizon, a gatekeeper finally came to announce their master's arrival.

The surrounding attendants had never seen such a dark expression hanging over Pang Shao's face.

None of them dared make the slightest sound. They practically held their breath as they watched Pang Shao storm past them toward the main hall, where several ministers had been waiting to meet with him for a while now.

As the door closed behind him, they heard him fly into a terrible rage.

The servants outside stood stock-still and perfectly quiet, as did the officials on the other side of the door.

Everyone present knew that Pang Cong had been trying to ingratiate himself with Pang Shao for some time now by pandering to his every whim. However, no one had expected him to grow so audacious, nor did they imagine an accident would so "coincidentally" befall him on his way to his uncle's residence.

Pang Cong's father was one of Pang Shao's elder brothers, also born to a concubine. Even though he wasn't ranked as highly as Pang Shao in the court, he served as an exceptionally competent right-hand man.

And now, in order to clear himself of suspicion, Pang Shao had been forced to sacrifice that brother and his entire family today. This was more than just a lizard dropping its tail; this was akin to cutting off an entire arm.

Needless to say, Pang Shao was livid.

But he was getting up there in years, and he had little energy to vent his anger after spending the better part of the night in the palace. He smashed a single teacup and berated the officials in front of him a little before he sat down on a wooden armchair, exhausted.

“To think that frail, dying dog could conceal such sharp claws and teeth,” he spat. “It seems I’ve underestimated him.”

“Grand Chancellor, is it possible that this was premeditated?”

Pang Shao scoffed derisively.

“Oh no, it was surely just a coincidence. He plotted to frame the Prince of Jing by planting an imperial robe on him, but on his way to inform me and seek my praise, his horses just happened to spook, he just happened to die from the fall, and the imperial robe just happened to fly out of his carriage,” he said sardonically. “If this wasn’t a setup, then the deities themselves must be wishing for my death.”

“Minister Pang makes a good point—there’s indeed something fishy about this incident!” another official quickly chimed in. “But…how do you know who the culprit is, Minister?”

Pang Shao gazed at him.

“Out of all the people in this court, who would need to do such a thing? And who would have the ability to accomplish such a thing?”

“Well…”

Everyone exchanged glances with each other.

Pang Shao sneered.

“It just so happens that His Majesty loves to hunt. To atone for my wrongdoings, I’ll prepare a grand gift for him on the hunting grounds in the coming days.”

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Following Pang Cong’s death, Jiang Suizhou’s assignment in the Ministry of Rites proceeded much more smoothly.

In a few short days, he finished his assigned task.

With summer fast approaching, so too did that excursion to Tianping Mountain. After taking a few days to rest, Jiang Suizhou began to prepare for the hunting trip.

This would indeed be a bit of a problem for him.

He didn’t have much experience with horseback riding. Prior to transmigrating, he’d only ever ridden at a horse racetrack—and that was simply a couple of laps across flat ground, with all the appropriate modern gear. As the Prince of Jing, he always seemed to be traveling around in a litter or carriage, so Jiang Suizhou hadn’t actually ridden any horses yet.

When the time came, he would probably have to spend a good amount of effort coming up with ways to slack off.

Meanwhile, Gu Changyun and Xu Du had brought up some significant concerns regarding the trip. When they learned of Jiang

Suizhou's decision to bring Huo Wujiu, they attempted to persuade him otherwise numerous times.

Their worry stemmed from a lack of trust in Huo Wujiu. After all, Huo Wujiu's legs were incapacitated, and he couldn't even walk. If there was any danger, they couldn't count on him to help.

Jiang Suizhou, on the other hand, wasn't worried in the slightest.

"It'll be in broad daylight, on the imperial hunting grounds. Surely there won't be too much trouble," he countered. "What's more, since Huo Wujiu is a prisoner of war whom I 'loathe' so much, I'll have to keep a close eye on him. What better excuse to avoid going into the mountain and participating in the hunt?"

They found Jiang Suizhou's logic to be somewhat reasonable, at least. Moreover, they truly couldn't change his mind, so in the end they had no choice but to drop the issue.

And so, before the heat of summer set in, the emperor's entourage departed from Lin'an.

Accompanied by palace guards, a magnificent procession of several hundred carriages paraded out of the city.

Tianping Mountain lay within the borders of Suzhou Prefecture, over sixty miles to the northwest of the capital. For some time, it had been a popular sightseeing destination renowned for its striking peaks and rugged cliffs. In autumn, the maple trees which blanketed the entire region painted a breathtaking picture, the many streams and creeks reflecting their vibrant red leaves.

Then, a year after the Jing capital moved south, Pang Shao took such a liking to the area that he ordered for it to be cordoned off. From that point

on, the mountain became the domain of the imperial family. Even a Daoist temple previously housed at the summit was torn down and rebuilt into a palace complex.

This was Jiang Suizhou's first time leaving the city of Lin'an.

He entered the imperial palace early in the morning with Huo Wujiu, and they climbed into the Prince of Jing's carriage to join the procession.

The emperor had been in a rather foul mood as of late, and he was stony-faced until he saw Huo Wujiu. Only then did he finally crack a smile as he indulged in a bit of ruthless mockery.

Though the emperor's mood temporarily improved, he didn't neglect to triple the number of troops encircling the Prince of Jing's carriage.

This became apparent to Jiang Suizhou as soon as he climbed into the carriage. He lifted the curtain to peek outside, then grinned at Huo Wujiu.

"Take a look at that," he remarked. "We've got an escort fit for an emperor."

Huo Wujiu cast an uninterested look outside through a gap between the window and curtain.

"I'm flattered," he said with an ambiguous chuckle.

For some reason, Jiang Suizhou felt as though his laugh was dripping in contempt. It was almost as if…

Well…

As if his legs were completely fine, and he couldn't care less about these people who were meant to guard him.

He was startled by his own thoughts, and a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. In the end, he chalked the feeling up to his eagerness

to see Huo Wujiu recover, which was in turn coloring his view of everything else.

Dawn crept over the horizon, and the procession slowly started moving.

The emperor claimed that this was a hunting trip, but in reality, it was just an excuse to go on a sightseeing tour. Personal attendants, such as palace maids and eunuchs, accompanied all the carriages on foot. That, in combination with the guards clad in armor and carrying flags, caused the procession to move at an exceptionally sluggish pace.

Once they left Lin'an, they followed the main road north. Even after traveling for half the day, it felt as if they hadn't covered much ground at all.

Around noon, Jiang Suizhou nudged aside the embroidered curtain and caught Meng Qianshan's attention.

"Do you know how long this journey will take?"

"Your Highness, given our current pace, it'll likely be evening by the time we make it to Tianping Mountain. However, I should note—I've been informed that we won't be stopping to rest at all today, or else we won't arrive until tomorrow. Otherwise, we'd have to spend the night along the road somewhere."

Jiang Suizhou glanced up at the sun, suspended high in the sky, and made a noise of agreement before lowering the curtain.

As he shrank back inside the carriage, he sighed.

"What a hassle this is," he said.

Huo Wujiu looked over at him. "What's the matter?"

Jiang Suizhou sank back into his seat. Naturally, the imperial prince's carriage was comfortable and luxurious, with ample room even for Huo Wujiu's wheelchair. Jiang Suizhou's seat was spacious and cushy, and the little table nearby boasted a delicious spread of tea and pastries.

Alas, the Prince of Jing found himself afflicted with those fragile ailments of the rich.

"My body aches from sitting for so long." He sighed again and adjusted the pillows behind him.

"We're going to be here for many more hours," Huo Wujiu said.

"Unfortunately so," Jiang Suizhou said. "Not to mention we had to wake up early today… The swaying of this carriage is giving me a headache."

Huo Wujiu gazed at him.

This delicate, sharp-featured man in his intricate robes, lounging in a pool of soft brocade, his brows furrowed as he complained about the pain and fatigue of sitting in a fancy carriage—he really was the epitome of a pampered noble.

Meanwhile, Huo Wujiu was used to carrying out multiday raids on horseback, or even on foot if circumstances were particularly dire. When trudging through rain, snow, and sandstorms, even while wounded or bleeding, well…who had time to complain about such trifling matters?

If someone had said similar words to the prince's to his face a year ago, he would've lifted him with one hand and tossed him out of the carriage by now.

Yet at this moment, he found himself thinking instead: *Indeed.*

It truly was insensitive to jostle someone around in a carriage for almost six hours on end without giving them a single chance to catch their breath.

He pulled out two pillows that had been tucked in his wheelchair.

“It’s still early; you should get some sleep,” he said as he stuffed them next to Jiang Suizhou.

Jiang Suizhou slumped against them. He wasn’t actually that sleepy, so he decided to strike up a conversation with Huo Wujiu as he relaxed.

“Honestly, it must be exhausting to sit in a wheelchair day in, day out.”

Huo Wujiu didn’t know what could possibly be exhausting about sitting. But since Jiang Suizhou said it, he responded accordingly.

“It’s not bad,” he said mildly.

“Even so, I promise we’ll find a more skilled doctor soon enough,” Jiang Suizhou continued. “The physician in charge of your treatment right now certainly isn’t anything special, as it turns out. Don’t fret—Gu Changyun has been keeping an eye out for you too. I admit there’s not much to show for it yet, but we’ll definitely be able to find someone who can heal you within a year or so.”

That piqued Huo Wujiu’s curiosity.

“How are you so sure?” he asked.

“What?”

“That you can heal me.”

Huo Wujiu paused before continuing slowly and carefully.

“That day…I was tortured under the personal supervision of Jiang Shunheng himself. He only allowed it to end once the imperial physician and torturer both said my legs were maimed for life.” He paused again. “What makes you so certain they can be healed?”

There was a lump in Jiang Suizhou’s throat.

It was one thing to know that this had happened, but it was another thing entirely to hear Huo Wujiu describe it to him.

Despite the bloody, agonizing nature of that memory, Huo Wujiu spoke about it with such detachment and nonchalance, as if he weren’t the one who had to endure that act of torture that day; as if he weren’t the one sitting in a wheelchair now.

For a long time, Jiang Suizhou said nothing. Then, just as Huo Wujiu glanced inquisitively at him, he cast his gaze toward the window and answered.

“I said I could find a way to heal you, so I will do exactly that,” he said softly, eyes fixed on the passing scenery.

His face was mostly expressionless, but Huo Wujiu could see a certain resolve in his eyes.

That resolve wasn’t born from absolute confidence. Rather, it was the reckless devotion of a man who intended to accomplish that which he’d set his heart on, no matter the cost.

Abruptly, Huo Wujiu’s hands curled into fists where they rested on his knees.

“There are so many doctors in this world,” Jiang Suizhou added. “The Imperial Academy of Medicine is not the be-all and end-all of medical

treatments. Not to mention, Jiang Shunheng has gotten away with too many evil deeds already. Things aren't always going to go his way."

Huo Wujiu looked at him, aching to come clean.

He wanted to tell him that in actuality, the goal he'd been striving so hard to achieve had come to fruition a long time ago—that if he hadn't sacrificed his own health in the search, Li Changning and Wei Kai would never have been able to make contact with Huo Wujiu so soon.

Jiang Suizhou should know that he was the reason that Huo Wujiu's legs had healed so quickly, without any lingering aftereffects.

However…Huo Wujiu couldn't bring himself to say any of that.

When the treatment began, he thought that it didn't even matter what Jiang Suizhou did or did not know. After all, there was nothing tying them together, was there? And in that case, there was no need for him to reveal the truth.

Now, Huo Wujiu realized that he *wanted* them to be tied together in some way. But ever since that day he first stood up on his own and found himself struck by that terrible momentary thought, he began to worry that his deception had become unforgivable.

This could all be rectified with one simple sentence, and yet it remained stifled in his mouth as he wavered again and again, unable to give voice to it.

He'd never been the type to hesitate until now.

A moment later, all of his turbulent thoughts were whittled down to a quiet "mm" he hummed in response—transient and fleeting, swiftly drowned out by the grind of the carriage wheels against the ground.

Chapter 61

AT SOME POINT during their idle conversation, Jiang Suizhou eventually fell asleep.

Although his seat was well padded, the walls of the carriage were exceptionally hard, and it was fairly uncomfortable to lean against them while being jostled around.

Oddly, that discomfort gradually disappeared as he fell into a deeper sleep. No longer hard and unyielding, the wall somehow became solid yet pliant, warm and stable. It supported him perfectly as he slept, almost as if he had slowly sunk into someone's embrace.

This nap lasted until he was woken up by Meng Qianshan.

"Your Highness? Your Highness, it's time to wake up—we're here!"

Jiang Suizhou blearily opened his eyes to see a stretch of bright lights outside the window. They'd already come to a stop in the courtyard. Outside the carriage, the waiting servants milled about. Huo Wujiu was near them, with Wei Kai pushing his wheelchair.

When Li Changning came to prepare his medicine the other day, he informed Jiang Suizhou that he wouldn't be able to accompany him on the trip. However, because Jiang Suizhou and Huo Wujiu both required daily decoctions, he requested that Jiang Suizhou bring his apprentice along instead.

Jiang Suizhou found this suggestion reasonable as he didn't want their treatments to become publicly known. For this reason, he agreed to allow Wei Kai to take Sun Yuan's place as Huo Wujiu's attendant.

Jiang Suizhou was still quite dazed from his nap. The world seemed to blur together before his eyes, and it took him a moment to gather his thoughts.

“I was sleeping too soundly; I didn’t even notice we’d arrived,” he remarked, his voice a little hoarse.

Meng Qianshan helped him out of the carriage. They were already in the palace complex built on Tianping Mountain. The elevation wasn’t very high in this region, but the mountains seemed to roll across the land in undulating lines. Tianping Mountain was one of those peaks, the former location of the Daoist temple that was leveled a few years ago.

Even in the darkness, the verdant scenery was indeed beautiful. The slopes were covered in dense forests laced with babbling brooks.

The palace complex wasn’t terribly large, but Pang Shao had made it priority that every inch of it was exquisite and polished. From afar, nestled in the mountains, it resembled a celestial palace, home to immortals.

Their courtyard’s main building had five rooms and was flanked by side buildings. After Meng Qianshan briskly got the servants settled, he ushered Jiang Suizhou and Huo Wujiu into the main building.

Luckily, there was one bed each in the eastern and western rooms, which saved them a good amount of trouble.

Even though Jiang Suizhou had slept for most of the journey, he wasn’t particularly *well-rested.* It was a long, bumpy ride, and he still felt weary and sore all over.

Upon entering the room, he allowed Meng Qianshan to help him wash up and get ready for the evening before lying down on the bed.

“I must say, I think my health has improved greatly,” Jiang Suizhou commented as Meng Qianshan tugged the blanket over him.

“How so, Your Highness?”

“This morning, my body ached so terribly that I thought I wouldn’t be able to endure until we arrived. Now, despite sitting for so long, I feel slightly better than I anticipated.”

Meng Qianshan failed to stifle a huff of laughter when he heard that.

“What?” Jiang Suizhou was puzzled.

Meng Qianshan shook his head.

“Nothing! Nothing at all,” he replied, beaming. “Your servant is just feeling happy for you, Your Highness.”

Still perplexed, Jiang Suizhou shot him an odd look but didn’t question him further.

With that, Meng Qianshan pulled the curtains shut around the bed before he withdrew from the room with a smile.

Of course he was feeling happy for His Highness. How could he not, after what he’d seen earlier?

After shuffling out of Jiang Suizhou’s bedroom, he giggled to himself.

He couldn’t exactly tell His Highness about the real reason for his lessened fatigue, could he? The answer was so much simpler than the prince seemed to think, and it had nothing to do with his health at all.

His thoughts inevitably turned to the scene he’d witnessed in the carriage.

At some point in the journey, he lifted the curtain to inform His Highness of something, only to discover that the prince had fallen asleep. But he wasn't leaning against the carriage wall! As it happened, Madam Huo had kindly slanted himself to the side so His Highness could rest against his shoulder.

More than that, Madam Huo seemed to be looking down at His Highness with an expression Meng Qianshan had never seen in his eyes before.

Based on what His Highness just told him, Meng Qianshan could only assume that Madam Huo had allowed His Highness to rest upon him for the remainder of the journey.

Overjoyed, Meng Qianshan couldn't contain his delighted laughter as he recalled these details.

Oh, he was very happy for His Highness, indeed! How wonderful to know that His Highness's feelings weren't so one-sided after all—his affection seemed to be fully reciprocated.

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There weren't enough rooms in the side buildings of the mountainside manor to accommodate the numerous servants who'd come along on the trip. As a result, they had to cram themselves into the available rooms as best they could. Even Meng Qianshan had to share a room with someone else.

Every one of them wanted to be prepared for the possibility of accompanying His Majesty on his hunt tomorrow, which would entail a

constant stream of tasks and errands. In consideration of that, Meng Qianshan assigned someone else to keep watch outside Jiang Suizhou's room for the night while he retired for the evening.

Meng Qianshan's room was a bit quieter than the others, as it only contained two beds. When he entered, he noticed his assigned roommate already lounging on the other bed. That person immediately stood up and bowed.

"Qianshan-gonggong," the boy greeted him respectfully.

It was Physician Li Changning's apprentice, disguised as a servant.

"There's no need for formalities," Meng Qianshan replied, waving a hand. "Make yourself comfortable."

He had deliberately assigned this youngster to his room. Not only was he Madam Huo's attendant, he also had to prepare medicine for the two masters. It would be for the best to keep him closer to Meng Qianshan, away from the many prying eyes and ears in the neighboring rooms.

The boy appeared to be well behaved, if a bit slow-witted, and he sat back down on the bed after Meng Qianshan spoke. Meng Qianshan sat on the other bed. As he took off his boots, he started to make small talk with the disciple.

"Your master has been attending to His Highness for some time now. Tell me, have Madam Huo's legs shown any signs of improvement at all?"

Wei Kai, who had been doing his best to appear naive and dense, instantly tensed when he heard that.

I'm being tested, he thought to himself.

He would have to choose his words very carefully.

“Qianshan-gonggong, we’ve only been able to alleviate some of Madam Huo’s pain thus far, so he won’t suffer so much on rainy days. But according to my master, the tendons in Madam Huo’s legs have been completely severed. I fear…this may be all that we can do.”

Hearing his answer, Meng Qianshan couldn’t help but sigh.

“It’s good he could alleviate some of Madam Huo’s pain,” he said.

Wei Kai hastily agreed as he surreptitiously analyzed Meng Qianshan’s expression.

Seeing how sincere the youngster was, Meng Qianshan couldn’t resist offering him some advice.

“You and your master need not concern yourselves with anything else—just be sure to provide Madam Huo the best possible care,” he said kindly. “If you can heal Madam Huo’s legs even the slightest bit, you two will have enough wealth and fame to last you the rest of your lives.”

At that, the blank look in Wei Kai’s eyes was no longer entirely feigned.

Had Meng Qianshan discovered his true identity? Why else would he say such a thing?

Meng Qianshan set his boots aside on the floor before he glanced up at him and smiled.

“Madam Huo is very important, you see.”

Wei Kai paused for a long moment.

“Why…do you say that?” he ventured hesitantly.

Meng Qianshan chuckled.

What an innocent young man, inexperienced in the ways of the world. Clearly, he had much to learn about these matters. Why else would a prince spoil a concubine so? He had a short chuckle to himself.

He glanced away, still smiling faintly.

“You may not understand now,” he said leisurely. “But you will in a few years.”

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Early the next morning, one of the emperor’s eunuchs came by with an imperial decree. Jiang Suizhou was to prepare himself to head down the mountain and join His Majesty on the hunt.

After being jostled around in a carriage all day yesterday, Jiang Suizhou had no desire to move a single muscle this morning, and he intended to send Meng Qianshan to tell them he had fallen ill from exhaustion, but the eunuch refused to leave. This invitation was mandatory—per His Majesty’s decree, the Prince of Jing was required to attend the hunt today.

Jiang Suizhou knew, of course, this meant the emperor was up to no good.

But his hands were tied. He had no choice but to accept his fate and drag himself out of bed so Meng Qianshan could help him change into his riding clothes.

At that moment, Huo Wujiu rolled himself into the room.

“What is it?” Jiang Suizhou asked, lifting his head sharply.

Huo Wujiu glanced out the window.

While everyone in the courtyard was from Jiang Suizhou's residence, they were surrounded by imperial guards who'd been stationed at every exit.

"Get in an argument with me before you leave," Huo Wujiu said. "Be sure to make a scene of it—say you don't trust me and lock me in the main building."

He paused. "Just be sure to leave Wei Kai in the room with me."

"What's this about?" Jiang Suizhou asked, a bit taken aback.

Before Huo Wujiu could begin to explain, he noticed someone attempting to peer into the room from afar. He ducked his head and rephrased his explanation more succinctly.

"Consider it self-defense."

Upon further reflection, Jiang Suizhou saw the logic behind the request. What would happen if the last emperor sent people to this courtyard while Jiang Suizhou left with everyone else, leaving Huo Wujiu here alone?

Jiang Suizhou gave him a quick, tiny nod.

The eunuch sent by the emperor waited for almost an hour before the Prince of Jing walked out of the main building, sporting riding clothes and a displeased expression. The servants filed out of the building, heads lowered, as though they'd been harshly reprimanded.

The eunuch hurried over just as the Prince of Jing began ordering the servants to lock the door, an icy look in his eyes.

“Give me the key. No one is allowed to open these doors until I return, not even if he dies inside.” His voice was haughty and ruthless.

“Oh my, Your Highness, what are you…?” the eunuch asked as he approached.

“What?” Jiang Suizhou tilted his head, expressionless. “Are you going to meddle in my family affairs too?”

Despite his hesitance, the eunuch had a keen eye, and his gaze honed in on the crack between the closing doors. He spotted Huo Wujiu, who was sitting upright in his wheelchair with an unreadable look on his face. The only servant left in the room was a young male attendant pushing his wheelchair.

The eunuch let out another cry of surprise.

“Your Highness, all the other officials are bringing their families today!” he said. “Why go through the trouble of locking this madam in the room…?”

“He can’t even ride a horse,” Jiang Suizhou snapped. “You think I’ll allow him to make a fool out of me?”

“Well…”

The eunuch was about to say something else when Meng Qianshan walked over to him with a pained look and tugged him aside.

“I implore you, don’t try to persuade him otherwise!” Meng Qianshan said. “You mustn’t concern yourself with anything involving that individual inside!”

Pulling him closer, Meng Qianshan continued in hushed tones.

“As you know, the madam is a prisoner of war. His Highness didn’t want to bring him in the first place,” he whispered darkly. “Not only that, he doesn’t allow him to roam around as he pleases. That’s why he’s locking him up under the pretense of being worried that he’ll escape.”

Understanding dawned on the eunuch’s face. He nodded and thanked Meng Qianshan for the explanation.

Earlier, Jiang Suizhou had told Meng Qianshan that this eunuch was inevitably going to inform His Majesty of everything he’d heard today. Once Meng Qianshan finished relaying what he was supposed to, he tucked his hands into his sleeves and retreated to the side, watching as the heavy lock was bolted securely onto the door. Even the windows were shuttered closed, one after another.

Only then did the Prince of Jing depart from the courtyard, an impressive entourage in tow.

The courtyard gradually fell quieter and quieter until Wei Kai could no longer hear anything happening outside at all. Startled by the unexpected turn of events, he ran over to Huo Wujiu urgently.

“General?” he said, still a bit dazed by it all.

General Huo stood up from the wheelchair and swiftly began to loosen his cloth belt.

“Swap clothes with me,” he ordered.

Wei Kai was stupefied, but he didn’t dare to disobey a command from his general. He started to take off his robes too.

“Listen closely to what I’m about to say next,” Huo Wujiu said.

Wei Kai promptly agreed.

“First, everything that just happened was my doing,” Huo Wujiu said. “I’m heading out in a bit, and you’re going to take my place here. All you have to do is sit in the wheelchair and wait for my return. The windows and doors are locked. No one will come inside, as long as you don’t make any noise.”

“Understood,” Wei Kai said. “But where are you going, General?”

Huo Wujiu had already removed his outer robe. He shrugged on the short robe that Wei Kai had set down on the table and deftly tied it shut.

As he swept his long hair back into a ponytail, he looked at Wei Kai.

“Didn’t I tell you the other day that I wanted to take someone with me?” he asked.

Wei Kai nodded.

Once his hair was bound properly, Huo Wujiu lifted a hand and patted his shoulder.

“That person is the Prince of Jing,” he said. “He’s not safe out there —I’m going to protect him.”

Chapter 62

AS JIANG SUIZHOU HAD EXPECTED, by the time he made it down the mountain on horseback, the news of what had happened in the courtyard had already spread.

The emperor greeted him with a nasty smirk, derisive as ever.

“Wudi, you certainly deserve to be called a trusted confidant of mine. My concerns are your concerns; my thoughts are your thoughts—how fortunate am I to have you by my side!”

Everyone around them laughed.

The emperor certainly seemed to be in high spirits today.

It was understandable. Pang Shao knew how to cater to Jiang Shunheng’s whims better than anyone. Not only were his newest lovers ready to wait on him hand and foot, Pang Shao had also scoured the land to find him the best steeds possible. Eunuchs waited nearby with massive, formidable hunting dogs. Reportedly, these grounds had been stocked with many exotic birds and beasts, each one tailored to the emperor’s taste.

Seeing Jiang Suizhou approach on his horse, the last emperor lazily cracked the whip in his hand and rode over to meet him.

“You’ve finally arrived, Wudi,” he said with a smile.

“My health has been lacking, thus resulting in my tardiness. I humbly await whatever punishment you see fit, Huangxiong,” Jiang Suizhou said, lowering his head.

Chuckling, the emperor looked him up and down.

Jiang Suizhou was dressed in a set of black riding robes. Despite his neat and tidy appearance, the pallor of his face was unmistakable.

“Worry not,” the emperor said breezily before riding off.

The rest of his entourage followed him to the hunting grounds.

A vast expanse of land had been partitioned off at the foot of the mountain, consisting of hills, rivers, and forests, stretching as far as the eye could see.

Unlike the northern regions, it was rare to find large, flat plains in Jiangnan. But since they were hunting on horseback, trees and bushes would only get in the way. Pang Shao had specifically ordered an entire forest with level terrain to be cleared out at the foot of the mountain, creating an artificial plain.

There were already quite a few mounted imperial guards scattered throughout the plain by the time they made it to the hunting grounds. The guards chased the penned-up animals out of the woods and onto the plain, so Jiang Shunheng could hunt as he pleased.

The emperor’s eyes lit up.

“Since we’ve come all the way here, hunt to your heart’s content, my esteemed officials! Today’s best hunter will be handsomely rewarded!”

As he spoke, he drew the bow on his back, and with a thrash of his whip, he charged toward a mountain goat up ahead.

The emperor may have encouraged them to “hunt to your heart’s content,” but all the officials present knew that the emperor’s riding and archery skills were both mediocre at best. If they were to actually do as His Majesty had instructed, they would only ruin his fun and cause him to lose face.

Everyone swiftly dispersed across the field, though most of them lagged behind the emperor at a distance.

Reluctant to get involved in any of it, Jiang Suizhou directed his horse to trot slowly along the edge of the crowd. Luckily, the sky was overcast and the weather was mild, so he just treated it as a nice, relaxed stroll. All things considered, it was rather pleasant.

He watched the last emperor hunt from afar.

Jiang Shunheng's marksmanship truly was abysmal. The goat was already exhausted after being driven down the mountainside, and imperial guards kept chasing after it relentlessly to cut off any escape routes. Though nearly all the odds were stacked in his favor, only one of the emperor's numerous arrows actually hit its hindquarters, which merely sent it careening on a rampage from the pain.

But no matter how awful the last emperor's marksmanship was, he was met with praise.

Those compliments only stoked the emperor's ego, and he loosed arrow after arrow. Yet even when they landed, they didn't hit any vitals.

After the emperor managed to aim four or five arrows well enough to roughly hit the mark, the goat finally crashed to the ground with a mournful bleat. Imperial guards swiftly surrounded it.

"What superb archery skills, Your Majesty! To bring down such a large beast in so short a time!" an official congratulated the emperor loudly.

The last emperor's face was covered in sweat, and holding the bow in one hand, he panted heavily. A look back at the officials strewn across the hunting grounds revealed most were empty-handed. A few people here and

there had been successful in their hunt, but their quarry was nothing bigger than a rabbit or pheasant.

With a satisfied expression, he ordered for the goat to be taken away; it was going to be served at the banquet that evening and shared among the court.

There was a chorus of thanks from the officials.

Surveying the plain, the emperor inevitably noticed the absence of a certain someone.

“Hm, where has Wudi gone?”

In response to his question, everyone else began searching for the Prince of Jing too. A moment later, Jiang Suizhou trotted up beside him on his horse.

“Huangxiong set off too quickly—I simply couldn’t keep up,” Jiang Suizhou explained with a shallow smile.

The last emperor caught a glimpse of his sickly complexion, and his lips curled up.

“Well, don’t just stand there, Wudi,” he said. “You have to at least *try* to hunt something today, isn’t that right?”

Jiang Suizhou cupped his fist in his other hand in salute. “Yes, Huangxiong.”

The emperor briefly glanced over his shoulder at Pang Shao, then back to Jiang Suizhou.

“Keep up. You’re going to hunt with me.”

Jiang Suizhou found this all to be extremely annoying, but he didn’t let his irritation seep out onto his face.

“Understood,” he replied, monotone.

Immediately, Jiang Suizhou began to plot his next move. In any case, the last emperor tossed everything aside as soon as he spotted his prey. It would be excusable if Jiang Suizhou wasn’t able to keep up since he wasn’t in great health and didn’t know any martial arts.

The alarmed cries of several people cut across the plain.

Now alerted, everyone else looked over to see the guards chase a huge, beautiful stag out of the woods.

Compared to the mountain goat, the stag was larger and much more robust, and it raced away. Even though multiple guards were pursuing it on horseback, it didn’t show any signs of fatigue. On the contrary, if someone tried to get in front of it, it would lower its head and charge at them, antlers first.

“Your Majesty!” an official shouted nearby.

The last emperor’s eyes were locked on the stag.

“Behold, as I hunt it down!” he cried, cracking his whip.

He thundered toward the stag.

With a sigh of resignation, Jiang Suizhou flicked his own whip and followed him.

Once again, the emperor shot countless arrows at the stag, but all of them missed the mark. Panic gradually started to creep over him, but he kept reaching behind him for more arrows.

Finally, one of them struck the stag’s hind leg.

Instantly, the creature entered an even more frenzied state. With a bellow, it rammed a nearby guard off his horse before barreling straight

toward the forest.

Everyone was thrown into a panic. They wanted to give chase, but this was His Majesty's quarry. As long as he didn't give the command, none of them dared to kill the stag.

The last emperor scanned the crowd around him. Then, out of nowhere, he steered his horse toward Jiang Suizhou.

"Wudi, why aren't you going after the deer for me?" the emperor shouted.

Jiang Suizhou just stared blankly at him, caught off guard.

Me? Go after the deer…?

But Jiang Suizhou didn't get the chance to refuse. The emperor galloped up next to him, and Jiang Suizhou jerked his reins to maintain his distance. The next thing he knew, the emperor raised his whip and landed a vicious blow on Jiang Suizhou's horse's rear.

His mount gave a startled whinny and immediately charged in the direction of the stag.

Horrified, Jiang Suizhou quickly wrenched the reins back in an attempt to stop it. At the same time, he heard a short, sharp whistle as something seemed to cleave through the air behind him.

Then his horse let out another long, terrible squeal and broke into a full-speed gallop, as though it had gone mad.

Jiang Suizhou's eyes widened.

That was a throwing knife!

But he couldn't afford to think about anything else. Doing his utmost to not get thrown from his horse, he tried to stabilize himself. A dense

thicket was fast approaching—and past that, the mountains hidden in the depths of the forests.

He had to find a way to stop the horse.

Yet it had undeniably been struck by a weapon of some sort, and it had worked itself into a frenzy, with a single-minded focus on charging forward. Some nearby guards seemed as if they wanted to come closer and stop him, but then the last emperor's voice rang out from behind.

"Everyone, move aside!" the emperor said. "The Prince of Jing is in a rush to pursue my quarry for me, so why are you blocking the way?!"

Jiang Suizhou's stomach dropped.

Amid the violent lurching and cutting wind, the expression that the emperor had worn earlier flashed through his mind.

It was malicious and sinister, and he kept exchanging looks with Pang Shao. Apparently, out of the magnificent course of gifts that Pang Shao had prepared for the last emperor, Jiang Suizhou was to be the pièce de résistance.

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The deer plunged into the woods and swiftly vanished.

Shortly after, Jiang Suizhou's horse also crashed through the thicket.

The intertwined branches of the trees snagged on the horse, finally managing to graze off some of its speed. Jiang Suizhou was even able to take in some of his surroundings.

Still moving at a gallop, the horse was growing so exhausted that it started to stumble a little. Jiang Suizhou knew even if he couldn’t stop it, he had to control where it was going, and he tugged at the reins.

Alas, his riding skills were subpar, and his body was physically weak besides. By this point, most of his energy had already been spent, and he couldn’t guide the horse at all. Worse yet, his grip on the reins had gradually loosened so much that he was now on the verge of being thrown off.

He clenched his jaw, his lips pressed together so hard that they went white.

If he fell off the horse—which was quite tall to begin with—at its current speed, he would end up grievously injured, if not dead. There were also many broken branches in the forest, making it that much more dangerous compared to a field.

Tamping back his panic as much as possible, he began running through potential countermeasures.

However, the horse was moving incredibly fast, and as he brainstormed, in the blink of an eye, he was already deep in the forest, with nothing else identifiable in sight. The terrain was precarious around Tianping Mountain; the entire mountain range stretched before him, dotted with ravines and gorges. If things continued like this, he was going to meet his end somewhere, even if it wasn’t from falling off the horse.

It was clear how much Pang Shao had come to hate him after the events in recent weeks.

Then in an instant, he spotted it—his only hope. Up ahead on his left sat a broken, decaying tree, a horizontal slash through the forest. Despite its

massive size, the trees on either side of it supported its weight in such a way that it was essentially suspended in midair.

Gritting his teeth, Jiang Suizhou used the last of his strength to yank on the reins, steering his horse toward his last chance.

Boom! The horse slammed into the massive tree trunk.

It crashed to the ground with a squeal, and as its momentum abruptly halted, Jiang Suizhou hunched forward, tumbling with it.

They both landed rather heavily; the impact seemed to rattle every bone in his body. Amid that all-encompassing ache, a stabbing pain radiated from his ankle.

He had braced that foot against the ground as he fell, and he'd most likely twisted it.

Jiang Suizhou sucked in a sharp breath from the pain. As he let it out, he glanced around.

Not too bad, he thought. It could have been far worse—at least he'd finally come to a stop, thus avoiding certain death.

He lay slumped on the ground, breathing heavily as exhaustion overwhelmed him. But before he could even begin to relax, he spotted several shadowy figures perched in the dense treetops.

He wasn't alone.

Immediately, a now-familiar whistling noise sliced through the air—a sharpened arrow, hurtling straight toward him. By the time it appeared in his line of sight, it was already much too late.

Ah, so the mantis was stalking the cicada, oblivious to the oriole behind it, he thought to himself. *A small victory, with the greater danger*

lurking unseen.

Jiang Suizhou was utterly drained at this point. Moreover, the arrow seemed to fly at lightning speed—in but an instant, it would hit its mark.

He knew he wouldn't be able to evade it.

He squeezed his eyes shut, readying himself for the inevitable. But it never came.

Instead, out of nowhere, he seemed to be buffeted by a gust of wind.

In front of him, something blocked the arrow with a crisp *clang*.

Jiang Suizhou's eyes snapped open in disbelief.

Before he could make any sense of what was happening, his arm was being gripped, and with one powerful tug on it, he was lifted from the ground.

Due to inertia, he stumbled right into the arms of a tall, well-built man. He dimly registered something tightening around his waist, and then he found himself pressed securely against the man's side.

In a split second, his protector reached for the sword at Jiang Suizhou's hip. He whipped the ornate weapon out from its scabbard, and a glint of silvery light arced through the air. The man kept one arm wrapped snugly around Jiang Suizhou's waist while he flawlessly parried shots with the sword in his other hand. A chorus of clear, sharp *pings* echoed through the air, and broken arrows rained down around them.

Still dazed, Jiang Suizhou lifted his head to see a striking profile from below, so angular it seemed chiseled from stone. Veiled by long eyelashes were a pair of dark, fierce eyes.

…Huo Wujiu?

Chapter 63

JIANG SUIZHOU FROZE IN PLACE. For a moment, he thought he must have been hallucinating.

Then another projectile *whooshed* past and sent him stumbling back to reality.

Following that sound was more windy whistling, then the rustling of branches and leaves. In a flash, he and Huo Wujiu were completely surrounded by shadowy figures.

Huo Wujiu's arm tensed around his waist once again, and Jiang Suizhou was pulled close behind him, shielded by his body.

"Be careful," Huo Wujiu said, his voice terse and low.

The figures crowded around them and charged forward from all directions, like a pack of wolves hunting their prey under the darkness of night.

It was few against many, and they were surrounded on every side. It should've been checkmate for them.

Yet the sword that was merely an accessory in Jiang Suizhou's hands became a sharp, lethal weapon in Huo Wujiu's. There was neither flash nor flair in the blade's arcing movements, yet it kept the assassins from darting in. After exchanging only a dozen or so blows, the attackers clad in black slumped to the ground one by one.

The chaotic rustling of leaves died down, and the forest fell quiet once more.

Seven or eight bodies lay scattered at Huo Wujiu's feet; fresh blood darkened the brown of the soil.

Jiang Suizhou looked up in shock to see Huo Wujiu staring down at the motionless bodies, holding the sword in one hand.

Blood dripped from the edge of the blade.

"…Huo Wujiu?" Jiang Suizhou asked blankly.

Had he gone mad, or was he hallucinating? Why would Huo Wujiu show up here at this exact moment? And how was he standing perfectly well in front of him, as if his legs had never been injured at all?

Huo Wujiu had yet to respond when a nearly inaudible whistling sound pierced through the air, along with a tiny flash of silvery light.

A tiny throwing needle shot out of the dense foliage, aimed straight at Jiang Suizhou.

Instantly, Huo Wujiu stepped forward to pull him to the side. The silver needle just barely brushed past Jiang Suizhou's cheek, cleaving off a lock of his hair.

In the same moment, an assailant leaped down from the treetop and rushed up to them, a dagger aimed at Huo Wujiu's throat.

It seemed the leader of the ambush had used the throwing needle as a distraction to try to catch Huo Wujiu unawares.

The momentum of Huo Wujiu's sidestep to pull Jiang Suizhou out of harm's way pushed Huo Wujiu into the path of the swinging dagger. Even though it was too late to block the attack, he remained composed.

The dagger plunged directly into the hollow of Huo Wujiu's shoulder. In that same heartbeat, with a slight twist of his sword, he ended his

assailant’s life, warm blood spraying across him.

It all happened in the time between one breath and the next, and Jiang Suizhou was so tightly pressed to Huo Wujiu that he hadn’t been able to see what exactly had gone on. All he heard following the brief conflict was a low, muffled grunt.

Realizing that the noise came from the chest plastered against his back, Jiang Suizhou felt a jolt of panic.

He whipped his head around to look at Huo Wujiu, but the scuffle was already over. Huo Wujiu surveyed the forest around them. Seeing no further threats, he slowly loosened his grip on Jiang Suizhou, and he tossed the sword aside with a clatter.

“Are you injured?” Huo Wujiu asked him, his voice deep.

As he waited for an answer, he raised his hand and yanked out the dagger embedded in his shoulder, utterly unfazed.

Warmth suddenly sprang up in Jiang Suizhou’s eyes at the sight. Only one thought remained in his head as he watched Huo Wujiu’s blood ooze out of the wound and mingle with the blood of their attackers.

“…You’re hurt,” he said.

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The forests of Tianping Mountain had been there long before the construction of the imperial hunting grounds. The terrain within them was complex and difficult to navigate, and the trees and brush were densely packed. It all seemed to stretch on endlessly.

Jiang Shunheng had merely watched as the crazed horse bolted into that untamed wilderness with Jiang Suizhou in tow. The guards and court officials all turned pale and looked about in alarm, but the emperor held his head high, unbothered, as he fixed his gaze on that forest.

More than anything else, he looked rather like a general returning from a fresh victory.

“No one is allowed to go in after him,” he declared. “I want to see whether or not my dear Wudi is capable of capturing that deer for me.”

Everyone knew that the forest was as deadly as any man-eating beast, and the frail, sickly Prince of Jing had never studied a day of martial arts in his life.

Of course he wasn’t capable of capturing the deer. He was only capable of breaking his neck in the depths of the forest.

Everyone knew this, but no one dared to say it aloud. This was His Majesty’s family affair, after all. If the emperor wanted him to hunt the deer, that was what he would have to do.

And if the emperor wanted him dead, well…

While everyone else wore guarded, cagey expressions, Jiang Shunheng quietly watched the far reaches of the forest. Beyond the nearly impenetrable cover of trees were towering cliffs and precipitous ridges, among other tantalizing dangers.

Amusement danced in his eyes.

He wanted to kill Jiang Suizhou; this wasn’t anything new. However, ancestral rites and customs took precedence, and he couldn’t just rashly take Jiang Suizhou’s life.

But this time, his uncle had promised that the Prince of Jing wouldn’t return alive, and nobody would have to lift a finger to make it happen.

The emperor gazed at the distant mountains for another moment. Then, as if nothing had happened, he cracked his whip and steered his horse toward several prey animals scattered across the plain, trotting in their direction.

“What are you all standing around for?” he asked.

That snapped the crowd out of their collective shock, and everyone abruptly resumed their previous activities. Each spurred by their own unspoken motives, they all pretended that absolutely nothing out of the ordinary had just occurred.

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Jiang Suizhou sat by himself on a fallen tree trunk.

Huo Wujiu made several trips back and forth, disposing of the corpses strewn across the ground in an efficient manner. It was quite rugged in this area of the mountain, and there was a ravine not too far away. Huo Wujiu’s actions were swift; it didn’t take long before the small clearing in front of Jiang Suizhou was spotless once more.

A gust of air announced Huo Wujiu’s return, and Jiang Suizhou looked up as he landed in front of him. He made no attempt to hide his fully functioning legs.

He sat down in front of Jiang Suizhou and ripped off a strip of fabric from his clothes.

Jiang Suizhou’s eyes didn’t stray from his shoulder.

After a brief silence, Huo Wujiu chuckled softly.

“Ask me anything you want,” he said. “What answers are you going to get by staring at me?”

Jiang Suizhou hesitated. When he spoke next, his voice was slightly wobbly.

“Do you want me to bandage it for you?”

Huo Wujiu placed the torn strip of fabric on Jiang Suizhou’s knees while he nimbly untied his own robe.

“No need; it’s not like you know how.”

He tugged aside one side of the robe, exposing his muscular shoulder. Quite a few old injuries decorated the little skin he’d bared—they were all faded scars at this point. The deepest one cut across his collarbone. The ferocity of it unexpectedly gave the flowing, powerful line of his clavicle a mesmerizing touch.

Among these scars, there was a new wound, still bleeding, in the hollow of his shoulder.

The dagger hadn’t gone in too deep, but it had torn apart the flesh quite gruesomely. With one hand, Huo Wujiu laid the strip of cloth over the wound and bit down on one end to hold it in place as he wrapped the fabric around his shoulder. In that rough manner, he finished dressing the injury.

“You’re not going to ask when my legs healed?” Still biting down on the strip of fabric, he didn’t look up from his shoulder as he spoke.

He projected an air of cool composure—only Huo Wujiu himself knew the nervousness in his eyes, concealed beneath his down-swept

eyelashes.

Suspicious from the beginning, he'd jumped out of the rear window in Jiang Suizhou's room and sneaked carefully around the guards to enter the mountain. On the way to the palace complex the previous day, he'd made sure to note down the position of the hunting grounds, and he'd beelined straight for it.

As expected, Pang Shao took action against Jiang Suizhou on the hunting grounds.

The emperor's whip had indeed struck Jiang Suizhou's horse, but Huo Wujiu knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that a throwing knife was what actually drove the horse into a frenzy.

Falling off the horse at a time like that could be deadly. With Jiang Suizhou's life in immediate danger, Huo Wujiu didn't have time to locate the perpetrator of that attack. Instead, he slipped into the forest in pursuit of the horse. It was a good thing he had, because right as he caught up to them, Jiang Suizhou fell into an ambush that had been set up well in advance.

Like he'd suspected, the horse was just a distraction, with the true danger lying in wait ahead. Pang Shao had prepared layers upon layers in this trap; he clearly never intended for Jiang Suizhou to have any chance of making it out alive.

At that moment, Huo Wujiu realized he couldn't afford to operate in secret. He couldn't protect Jiang Suizhou from behind the scenes when the attempt on his life was this brazen.

The only way to guarantee Jiang Suizhou's survival was to reveal himself…and the truth about his recovery.

It certainly wasn’t an ideal situation, but he didn’t regret his decisions.

He kept his gaze lowered as he pretended to focus on bandaging his wound. He couldn’t help but grow a little heavy-handed, pulling the fabric so tight that blood oozed out of it slightly.

Then Jiang Suizhou finally answered his earlier question.

“I don’t need to ask about your legs,” he said. “Li Changning lied to me earlier, right?”

Huo Wujiu’s hands faltered.

“Mm,” he intoned faintly.

“Which means he’s working for you,” Jiang Suizhou said. “The first time I met that apprentice of his, I thought he seemed more like a soldier. And when he saw you, his expression was…a bit strange. I suppose I just didn’t have the energy to question it, being sick at the time, so I took Li Changning at his word when he said his apprentice used to be a peasant farmer.”

Huo Wujiu felt as if his heart had been bound by an extremely thin silk string. Though Jiang Suizhou’s voice was remarkably calm, the more he said, the tighter that string was pulled.

He’d been in the middle of tying a knot on the bandage, but his hand abruptly stopped. He couldn’t quite bring himself to move it again.

I should’ve expected this, he thought. *He’s always been clever. As long as he sees it for himself, he doesn’t require any further explanation.*

Nonetheless, there was an oddly bitter taste in his mouth.

Prior to this, he felt like a criminal awaiting his sentence, his fate hanging by a thread. Now, with the truth finally revealed and the dust quickly settling, he didn't feel any happier about it somehow.

"That's correct," he said. "So…"

So, I'm actually not an honest partner to work with. You can be disappointed in me, but I will still fulfill the promises I've made to you.

There was a lump in his throat; the words wouldn't leave his mouth.

"So, hold on, you can't wrap your wound like this," Jiang Suizhou piped up. He leaned forward and looked directly in Huo Wujiu's eyes as he added, "I may not have much experience with this sort of thing, but even I know you can't just treat a wound in this manner. We should clean it first, right? We might not have any ointment, but I can hear the sound of running water. Is there a stream nearby?"

Huo Wujiu paused. "There is, about eight hundred feet to the west."

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's head over there." Jiang Suizhou rose from the log.

He'd been sitting for a while, and since Huo Wujiu had supported his weight earlier during the ambush, he'd already forgotten all about his twisted ankle. The instant he put weight on his foot, he buckled, sucking in a pained breath.

Alert as ever, Huo Wujiu caught him at once in his sturdy, well-defined arms. Those arms remained a stable and exceptionally reassuring presence as Jiang Suizhou gratefully allowed himself to be propped up so he wouldn't collapse to the ground.

"What's wrong with your ankle?" Huo Wujiu asked.

“I twisted it when I fell off the horse.”

There was a moment of silence, soon broken by Huo Wujiu gritting his teeth and clicking his tongue in exasperation.

“How can you forget about something like that?”

Jiang Suizhou looked a little sheepish.

In all honesty, it was because he’d been too alarmed at the sight of Huo Wujiu’s wound earlier. All he could focus on was Huo Wujiu, to the extent that any thought of his own injury fell by the wayside.

Fortunately, he didn’t have to say a word of that. When Huo Wujiu looked down and saw his expression, he instantly understood what had gone through Jiang Suizhou’s head.

Truly, his hands always seemed to be tied with this person.

“A moment ago, when I told you that Li Changning was lying to you…” he said in a low voice, then paused. “You must realize now that he takes orders from me and that…”

“And that’s a good thing!” Jiang Suizhou interrupted. “I’ve been fretting over what to do about your legs, but I never expected your people would manage to slip in and heal them for you.”

Huo Wujiu blinked a couple of times, then glanced down at Jiang Suizhou.

Jiang Suizhou returned his gaze, head tilted back. The joy gleaming brightly in his eyes didn’t seem feigned in the slightest.

“So…why aren’t we hurrying over to the stream yet?” he said. “Your legs may be fine now, but if we don’t clean your wound soon, you’re going to lose an arm instead.”

Chapter 64

EVEN THOUGH THEY COULD faintly hear the babbling of the stream from where they were, it was still some distance to the water.

Jiang Suizhou initially intended to borrow Huo Wujiu's shoulder to hobble over, but Huo Wujiu seemed to have his own ideas. He leaned in to grasp Huo Wujiu's arm, only for the man to bend down and knead his ankle instead.

Jiang Suizhou inhaled sharply from the pain and reflexively shrank back.

"You rolled it," Huo Wujiu stated as he straightened up. "You can't walk right now."

"But…"

Before Jiang Suizhou could say anything more, the solid ground vanished from underneath him, and his feet dangled helplessly in midair.

Huo Wujiu had scooped him up in his arms.

"H-hey!"

Startled, Jiang Suizhou instinctively struggled against his grip. Fortunately, Huo Wujiu had a good, firm hold on him as he began walking in the direction of the stream.

"Stop moving around," Huo Wujiu told him.

The back of Jiang Suizhou's neck flushed so violently it felt like it was on fire.

What did Huo Wujiu think he was doing?! Sure, he couldn’t walk right now, but even so…this was rather intimate.

There was a strange energy between them as he wriggled awkwardly in Huo Wujiu’s arms. He couldn’t quite put his finger on what or why that was, but the sensation made Jiang Suizhou’s heart pound wildly against his chest.

“Just put me down!” he said urgently.

Huo Wujiu glanced down at him, somewhat puzzled.

Under Jiang Suizhou’s dark hair, his ears—usually pale as porcelain—were dyed ruddy red.

Only then did Huo Wujiu belatedly realize he was carrying Jiang Suizhou in a way that might have been considered a bit inappropriate.

He hadn’t thought much of it when he did it—it was simply the most convenient option.

But now that the thought had struck him, he had to acknowledge how endearingly meek this man suddenly seemed, curled up as he was in Huo Wujiu’s arms—entirely dependent on him.

He didn’t actually want to put him down again.

Without batting an eye, he shifted his gaze away from Jiang Suizhou’s burning ears and kept walking.

“We’ll be there soon,” he deflected.

His voice was calm, his expression unruffled, as if he didn’t notice anything improper about this at all. And he certainly didn’t notice the person in his arms growing more tense and flustered by the second.

“Watch out,” he warned as Jiang Suizhou continued to flail. “You’re going to fall if you keep squirming around.”

His words seemed to cow Jiang Suizhou into behaving. He let out a quiet “oh” and stopped struggling, now stiff from head to toe.

He ducked his head as low as possible, like he wanted to hide himself away.

Unbeknownst to him, however, Huo Wujiu wasn’t as unbothered as he appeared.

His arms tightened nervously around Jiang Suizhou.

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With Jiang Suizhou absent, the emperor ended up having quite the successful hunt.

They’d arrived at the hunting grounds early in the morning. By the time the sun was approaching the western mountains, the emperor had managed to bag various prey animals, large and small.

With no shortage of military officials present, it wouldn’t have been difficult to take down a few of the bigger, more impressive predators, should they have taken it seriously. But as everyone knew, His Majesty’s hunting skills were subpar, despite his love for it, and he lacked the courage to pursue quarry such as wolves or tigers.

To top it off, the emperor had a lot of pride and a fragile ego. No one dared to risk upstaging him, especially on this inaugural hunt.

When it was time to tally up everyone’s catches, the emperor had the most by far. He made a show of reprimanding the military officials a little, saying their combat skills were growing rusty, and they needed to train more diligently.

Naturally, the officials had to agree. While the emperor seemed to be admonishing them, in reality, there was a smug smile on his face.

Sure enough, once he was done with his lecture, he made a sweeping gesture with his hand and instructed the guards to take away the animals he’d caught today, so the imperial kitchen could use them as part of tonight’s grand feast for the court.

He didn’t make a single mention of the Prince of Jing, who had yet to return from the forest.

Everyone looked cheerful and merry on the surface as they knelt down and thanked His Majesty for his kindness.

At that moment, hoofbeats thundered in the distance.

Before their curious gazes appeared a tall, black horse galloping toward them, bearing a heavyset rider.

The closer he drew, the clearer his features became.

His face was wide and square-shaped, with a pair of bulging eyes the size of copper bells. He was tall, broad, and every bit as frighteningly ugly as a ghost envoy from the underworld.

It was Ji Hongcheng.

The emperor frowned. The jubilant expression on that hideous face seemed…mildly concerning.

Ji Hongcheng halted the horse in front of him and swiftly dismounted to kneel before the emperor.

“Your Majesty!” he cried in a resounding voice.

“What is it?” the emperor asked disdainfully. The question was purely out of obligation—he couldn’t have cared less about any good news the man might have had to report.

“Your official just took down a tiger and wishes to offer it to Your Majesty!” Ji Hongcheng answered proudly.

The emperor choked out a strangled noise in response. The surrounding officials exchanged anxious looks, the smiles freezing on their faces.

It was one thing to be so stubborn and focused, but who in their right mind would accompany His Majesty on a hunt and attempt to overshadow him?

The emperor didn’t reply immediately. He glanced in the direction Ji Hongcheng had come from and saw several guards making their way toward them on horseback, arduously dragging an object the size of a small hill behind them.

Ji Hongcheng didn’t just take down any tiger—it was a huge, brawny adult tiger.

As the emperor looked back at his own measly pile of goats and deer, annoyance surged through him.

This Ji fellow truly knew how to put a damper on things.

“I see. This certainly takes the top spot in the hunt, my dear official. I should reward you handsomely.”

“Many thanks, Your Majesty!” Ji Hongcheng wasn’t the least bit modest.

Gnashing his teeth, the emperor wished he could order him to commit suicide instead.

“How about…I honor you with an assignment?”

He gazed down at Ji Hongcheng from atop his horse. Despite the breezy tone of his voice, his jaw was tightly clenched.

“The Prince of Jing went into the forest earlier in pursuit of a deer, but he still hasn’t come back. I’m worried for him. If you can find him and bring him back, I will bestow a generous reward upon you.”

The emperor glanced at the sun, which was gradually sinking down toward the horizon.

An entire day had gone by; judging from the color of the sky, it was about time to fetch his brother’s dead body. Let Ji Hongcheng be in charge of this inauspicious task. That way, he could eventually accuse this tactless imbecile of failing to adequately protect the Prince of Jing, resulting in his death, and then ship him off to the execution grounds too.

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Jiang Suizhou sat on a stone next to the stream, watching Huo Wujiu as he crouched by the water and cleaned the wound on his shoulder before rewrapping the bandage.

Jiang Suizhou had forced him to do it. When they arrived at the stream, Huo Wujiu was determined to examine Jiang Suizhou’s ankle, but

Jiang Suizhou insisted that Huo Wujiu take care of himself first.

Huo Wujiu, of course, couldn't refuse him.

Rising, he tugged the robe back up over his shoulder from where it'd fallen to his elbow. Then he returned to Jiang Suizhou and leveled a somewhat disapproving look at him.

"You're going to stop moving around now, right?" he said.

Jiang Suizhou just chuckled and allowed him to examine his ankle.

Huo Wujiu lowered himself to one knee and gently pulled Jiang Suizhou's injured foot onto his leg.

"So, what are you planning to do?" Jiang Suizhou asked.

Head downcast, Huo Wujiu remained focused on tending to Jiang Suizhou's injury as he answered carefully.

"Since Jiang Shunheng wants you dead, he won't send people after you right away," he explained as he removed Jiang Suizhou's boot. "I'll wait here with you until he does, then I'll head back first. When the time comes, just tell them you hurt your ankle while falling off the horse, and you made your way to this stream by yourself. Those hit men answered to Pang Shao. There's no way Jiang Shunheng knows his uncle has been training hit men in private, so he won't suspect anything."

Jiang Suizhou nodded. "I was thinking the same."

Huo Wujiu set his boot and sock aside before grasping the arch of his foot. Since he was naturally fair-skinned, it stood to reason that his feet were even paler. So pale, in fact, that his foot seemed to glow under the afternoon sun. Blue-green veins were faintly visible, giving his skin an almost translucent quality.

As Huo Wujiu cradled his foot in his rough palm, something quite odd happened—Jiang Suizhou felt his ears inexplicably begin to burn once again.

Very strange indeed, but Huo Wujiu didn't seem to notice anything amiss. His hand shifted slightly as he inspected the state of Jiang Suizhou's injury.

"Bear with me for a second," Huo Wujiu said.

Without any further warning, Huo Wujiu's hand twisted and something within Jiang Suizhou's ankle made a vague cracking noise. Jiang Suizhou drew a sharp breath in response.

"Done," Huo Wujiu said. "It's still going to be inflamed, but that'll subside with a few days of rest."

He ripped off another strip from the bottom of his robe. After wrapping Jiang Suizhou's ankle, he slipped his boot back on for him.

Privately, Huo Wujiu couldn't help feeling a bit relieved when that luminously pale skin was covered once more by fabric.

He got up and sat down next to Jiang Suizhou.

"But what about after that?" Jiang Suizhou asked, circling back to the previous topic. "What other plans do you have?"

He'd been itching to ask that question for a while now.

Jiang Suizhou had no idea what tricks Huo Wujiu had hidden up his sleeve to be able to escape from the Prince of Jing's residence and return to Northern Liang in the "official" version of events. But for the timeline to be moved up to where it was today, he knew it was in part due to his own efforts.

If he hadn’t prioritized scouring the land for a doctor to treat Huo Wujiu, then Huo Wujiu’s men wouldn’t have been able to make contact with him so quickly or closely. Against the odds, his own plans and preparations aligned with that of Huo Wujiu’s men, thus helping Huo Wujiu.

As Jiang Suizhou marveled at this realization, an unexplainable happiness welled up inside him, unable to be contained.

Huo Wujiu cast a sidelong glance at Jiang Suizhou, only to see him looking back at him with bright, shining eyes.

He hesitated. Not only was Jiang Suizhou not angry, he was genuinely happy for him. For a moment, Huo Wujiu wasn’t sure if this was something to be grateful for. By all rights, he should have been quite pleased by it, and yet…this reaction proved all his previous concerns to be utterly groundless. Somehow, he found himself slightly disappointed instead.

Instead of answering, he simply flatly stated, “Next, I’m going to get you something to eat.”

His expression was unperturbed as he abruptly stood up, as if he hadn’t understood the question. He didn’t seem to be joking.

“No, I meant…” Jiang Suizhou started.

“I know what you meant,” Huo Wujiu said. “But didn’t you ask me to protect you?”

Jiang Suizhou didn’t quite understand how this was related.

“I did,” he answered quietly.

Huo Wujiu leaned over and picked up Jiang Suizhou's sword. In passing, he noticed Jiang Suizhou looking up at him, confused.

Huo Wujiu's eyes couldn't help but soften at that sight, and he patted the top of Jiang Suizhou's head.

"I can leave whenever I want, if I so choose," he said. "However, wouldn't Jiang Shunheng take his anger out on you?"

Of course he would.

Jiang Suizhou meekly went quiet.

"So…no, I don't have any immediate plans," Huo Wujiu said. "I'm going to stay here and respond as the situation demands. Sooner or later, I'll find an opportunity to pinpoint their weaknesses. Then, we'll launch an offensive from inside and out. It'll catch them completely off guard, and they'll see what it means to invite a wolf into their house."

At that, Jiang Suizhou let out a huff of laughter.

"That wolf analogy doesn't exactly put you in a good light," he said.

"Well, I'm not trying to be a good person," Huo Wujiu quipped as he washed the blade in the stream. "Wait for me here. I'll be back soon."

Jiang Suizhou nodded, and Huo Wujiu headed back into the forest, sword in hand.

His smile slowly faded, but his gaze lingered unwaveringly on Huo Wujiu's back until he disappeared completely amid the trees.

He was well aware that Huo Wujiu had made light of the situation. Regardless of all that bravado about the emperor inviting a wolf into the palace and taking them down from the inside, Jiang Suizhou knew that it

would be easier and more straightforward for Huo Wujiu to simply return to Northern Liang.

He was an ever-victorious general. The most advantageous place for him to be was on the battlefield—his troops were his hands and feet, the sharp sword he wielded.

And his promise to Jiang Suizhou was the shackle that kept him in Southern Jing.

He was the only reason that Huo Wujiu wasn't planning his escape.

Realizing this, Jiang Suizhou felt conflicted to say the least.

He'd always had to rely on himself, even in his previous life; transmigrating didn't fundamentally change that. While he'd had parents in his previous life, neither seemed to prioritize him. His father had no shortage of lovers and other children, and his mother only had eyes for his father.

As a prince, he appeared to live a life of luxury and privilege. In reality, he walked a tightrope. His countless enemies watched him like hawks, ready to dive for his throat at the first opening—and yet so many other people's lives depended on him. There was no one he himself *could* rely on.

But now…

Now here was someone who willingly chose to bind his own hands and feet and toss away his sword, who intended to stay at Jiang Suizhou's side no matter the personal cost, humiliation and all, simply because he'd sworn to protect him.

He didn't seem to be alone anymore.

Chapter 65

HUO WUJIU KEPT his word.

It wasn't long before he returned, holding the bloodstained sword in one hand and some dry branches tucked under his arm. In the other hand, he carried a lifeless white rabbit.

He headed straight for the streambank next to Jiang Suizhou, where he crouched down and began skinning the quarry with practiced movements.

The three-foot-long sword in his hands didn't seem to hinder him at all—he wielded it as deftly as always. Jiang Suizhou sat nearby, observing him curiously. In no time at all, Huo Wujiu finished preparing the rabbit and set it down on a relatively clean slab of rock.

Once that was done, he turned to the pile of branches he'd gathered.

"You really know how to do everything, don't you?" Jiang Suizhou remarked lightly.

Huo Wujiu glanced up at him. Jiang Suizhou was sitting on the same stone as before, looking quite well-mannered. Even though he was dressed in sleek riding attire with sleeves that tucked in at the wrist, it did nothing to mask that distinctive bearing of his, typical of a rich and powerful young nobleman. Here, on the desolate mountainside, without any sign of human habitation around them, he was like a piece of beautiful jade that had been dropped in the middle of the wilderness.

After being caged in wealth and splendor his entire life, everything must have been fresh and novel to those eyes.

Unlike Jiang Suizhou, Huo Wujiu had been running wild since he was a kid. Not much went on in Yangguan, bleak and barren as it was. Out on the untamed frontier, hunting was a popular pastime among the youth. Whatever they caught—rabbits, geese, anything—they cooked on the spot. Everyone knew how to do it, because there was little else to do.

Later on, he followed his father through years of marching, warring, and defending fronts. Needless to say, the conditions were even harsher than Yangguan. During marches, they ate whatever was on hand; it was incredibly commonplace to roast and eat the animals they hunted.

All he did was kill and skin a rabbit—yet to the Prince of Jing, Huo Wujiu suddenly “knew how to do everything.”

Unable to stop the smile that tugged at his lips, he silently lowered his gaze and struck a flint against the blade of the sword. Sparks flew out and landed on the pile of branches, setting them aflame.

That smile didn’t escape Jiang Suizhou’s notice, though, and he grew a bit embarrassed about his silly, idle comment.

In the end, he could only blame it on his own lack of worldly experience, as a modern-day person who’d never so much as butchered a chicken before.

Huo Wujiu skewered the skinned and cleaned rabbit and placed it on a makeshift frame above the fire. Soon, the tantalizing fragrance of meat filled the air as the oil and fat in the rabbit cooked out, crackling on the surface.

Jiang Suizhou’s eyes involuntarily shifted from the rabbit to Huo Wujiu’s face.

At this time of day, the sunlight was perfect in both angle and brightness, washing over his features in a way that was quite pleasing to the eye.

Prior to today, Jiang Suizhou had never seen Huo Wujiu stand before, nor had he ever seen him sit so casually and freely on the ground. Right now, he seemed to glow with radiant light—a light that was rightfully his, regained after shaking off the chains weighing him down.

This was how Huo Wujiu was supposed to be.

And he was truly handsome beyond words.

Jiang Suizhou didn't get to stare for too long before Huo Wujiu noticed and cast him a questioning glance.

"What is it?" Huo Wujiu asked.

Jiang Suizhou swiftly averted his gaze.

"Nothing," he replied. Then, feeling a little guilty, he hastily made up an excuse. "I was just wondering—are you still going to have to act like your legs aren't healed?"

"Mm-hmm. I can't let them find out before I'm ready to make my move," Huo Wujiu said.

Jiang Suizhou nodded.

"So, do you have any ideas in mind?" he asked.

Huo Wujiu was quiet for a second. "Do you know who Lou Yue is?"

Of course Jiang Suizhou knew who he was.

He was one of Southern Jing's few renowned generals, and he used to be among the former marquis's closest friends.

When the Huo family took up arms and rebelled against the state of Jing, it was only because Emperor Ling of Jing intended to eradicate them. That was why they went from being Southern Jing's illustrious family of famed generals to traitorous insurgents hell-bent on overthrowing the current dynasty.

But Lou Yue wasn't involved in any of that whatsoever, and he also happened to be many miles away at the time it began. He'd been busy cleaning up the bandits in the south, and consequently, he'd ended up staying in Southern Jing.

Both Emperor Ling of Jing and his son, Jiang Shunheng, were aware of Lou Yue's friendship with Huo Wujiu's father, and so they didn't dare make use of him. According to the historical records, the current—and final—emperor never once allowed Lou Yue to take part in the war, not even when Huo Wujiu marched south to Lin'an with full command of his army.

Three days before the city was breached, the last emperor, so afraid that Lou Yue was colluding with the enemy, stripped him of his military command and executed him.

Unsurprisingly, though the emperor took direct control of all of Lou Yue's soldiers, he failed to repel Huo Wujiu's assault, and Southern Jing fell.

Jiang Suizhou paused, lost in thought.

Lou Yue had one child—a daughter named Lou Wanjun. After Jiang Shunheng was deposed, Huo Wujiu saved her and bought her north with him, taking her in.

From that point on, he kept Lou Wanjun by his side. This remained unchanged even when he eventually returned to Yangguan to keep watch

over the border.

There were many clues as to the nature of their relationship scattered throughout the historical records. When Lou Yue and the former marquis were younger, they made a verbal promise to marry their children to one another. In a way, Huo Wujiu and Lou Wanjun were childhood friends who'd grown up together.

Since Lou Wanjun lost her mother at an early age, she'd lived with her father all year round. After spending her formative years tagging along after her father in the army, she would grow up to be a military commander of rare talent in her own right.

However, Lou Yue was rather conservative, and he never allowed her to fight on the battlefield or lead the troops. She watched and learned, but she only received the chance to prove herself in battle after she started following Huo Wujiu, allowing her to leave her mark on history.

There were no records of their marriage, but all the historical accounts—official and unofficial alike—tacitly agreed that Lou Wanjun was Huo Wujiu's closest female companion. Not to mention Lou Wanjun later had a son. While his biological father was unknown, he took Huo Wujiu's surname.

Jiang Suizhou knew all of this like the back of his hand. He'd read no less than five different papers on this very topic.

But when he thought about it now, an indescribable emotion swelled in his chest. He couldn't identify what it was, precisely, but it felt particularly uncomfortable.

He sat there for a while, completely zoned out, until he heard Huo Wujiu's voice.

“What’s wrong?” Huo Wujiu was asking.

“I know who Lou Yue is,” Jiang Suizhou quickly confirmed, replying to Huo Wujiu’s original question. He smiled, but the corners of his mouth felt oddly heavy, and his smile felt forced.

“Is there bad blood between the two of you?” Huo Wujiu asked, puzzled.

Jiang Suizhou shook his head. “No.”

Huo Wujiu studied him for a moment, brows furrowed. He glanced up at the sky, then back at Jiang Suizhou.

“Your complexion is quite poor. Is it heatstroke?”

Jiang Suizhou had no idea why his complexion would be any worse than usual. In fact, he hadn’t noticed anything off at all. Sure, he’d suddenly started to feel a bit uncomfortable a moment ago, but that was neither here nor there. Perhaps the effects of Gu Changyun’s medicine still lingered in his system, occasionally flaring up.

“I’m fine. You were saying?”

Huo Wujiu looked at him for a few more seconds before he finally continued.

“Well, there’s not much more to say. Due to an unexpected turn of events, I happened to save his life many years ago. My plan is simply to demand that he repay my kindness.”

He was remarkably blunt about it, as if making such a demand was a very honorable thing to do.

“Can you guarantee he’ll help you?” Jiang Suizhou asked, forcing down the discomfort in his chest.

Huo Wujiu turned his gaze to the crackling flames.

“He’s loyal to the court, but he isn’t a fool. He should know what kind of person Jiang Shunheng is. What’s more, we’re already past the point of no return with the Jing court—only one side will survive. It’s time he thinks it through and decides which side to stand on.”

He paused, then said airily, “Even if he doesn’t care about his own life, he has to think about his daughter’s.”

Jiang Suizhou was taken aback.

From the way Huo Wujiu was talking… Surely there wasn’t anything already going on between him and Lou Wanjun, right?

For whatever reason—even though they were clearly in the middle of a serious discussion—that was the first thought that popped into his head when he heard Huo Wujiu’s offhand remark.

He was startled, but this was soon overtaken by a prickle of belated irritation.

What was he thinking? As if Huo Wujiu’s relationship with Lou Wanjun had anything to do with him…

Suddenly, a cloud of steam warmed his face.

Jiang Suizhou looked up to see crisp, sizzling rabbit being thrust toward him. Huo Wujiu waved the skewer of the roasted meat to draw his attention to the food.

“Is the sun messing with you, or is there something wrong with the medicine Li Changning has been preparing for you?” he said. “Get your head out of the clouds and eat.”

***

Huo Wujiu's culinary skills were indeed impressive.

They didn't have any seasoning out here, yet he still managed to roast the rabbit to perfection—crispy on the outside, tender on the inside, and overflowing with juices.

Unfortunately, Jiang Suizhou didn't have much of an appetite, and his stomach was sensitive. He could only finish one leg before he couldn't eat any more.

The remaining meat ended up in Huo Wujiu's stomach.

Once Jiang Suizhou had finished eating, Huo Wujiu swiftly cleaned up the surrounding area. In minutes, all evidence of the fire disappeared without a trace.

The sun slowly began to set.

Jiang Suizhou sat next to the stream, gazing aimlessly up at the gradually darkening sky. The scenery was beautiful here in the mountains, the wind refreshing and pleasant. He hadn't felt this relaxed since transmigrating.

Even so…

"Isn't this a bit too heartless of the emperor?" Jiang Suizhou lamented. "The day's almost over, and still, no one's coming to fetch my body."

Next to him, Huo Wujiu laughed. "He's worried all his efforts would have been in vain."

“Oh right!” Jiang Suizhou exclaimed, abruptly remembering something. “You’ve been gone for so long. You won’t be discovered, will you?”

“No, they’re all at the hunting grounds—they’re not going back to the complex anytime soon. Besides, didn’t I tell you to lock me in the room earlier today?”

“What? You already knew so early that something was going to happen at the hunt?”

I knew as soon as I learned you were accompanying the emperor on this expedition, Huo Wujiu thought grimly.

But before today, it was merely speculation born from concern for Jiang Suizhou’s well-being. That didn’t really count, did it? Either way, though, Huo Wujiu’s lack of denial was essentially an unspoken agreement.

Now it was Jiang Suizhou’s turn to worry.

“Maybe it’d be better for you to head back?” he fretted. “If you’re found out, wouldn’t that put you in danger? I just have to wait for people to find me now; you don’t need to keep watch here too.”

Huo Wujiu shot him a glance. “There are wolves on the mountain.”

Jiang Suizhou faltered, and every other unspoken objection died in his throat.

“I hear they even released a few tigers for the hunting grounds,” Huo Wujiu added.

Jiang Suizhou sheepishly fell silent.

Seeing the worry on his face, Huo Wujiu simply couldn’t help himself. A mischievous smile played at his lips.

“Not afraid?” he asked as he stood up to leave. “Well then, I might as well head back—”

A panicked hand shot out and latched onto the hem of Huo Wujiu’s robe.

“D-don’t go!” Jiang Suizhou yelped.

Huo Wujiu froze in place. He succeeded in keeping his face mostly expressionless, but there was a distinct gleam of amusement in his eyes as he gazed down at him. Because he stood against the light, this playful glint was invisible to Jiang Suizhou.

The prince had also completely forgotten one simple fact—Huo Wujiu was a bit of a scoundrel. He had grown up tussling and scuffling in military camps. No matter how respectable he seemed now, some of that wicked energy stayed entrenched in his bones.

In that moment, Jiang Suizhou fully believed that if he didn’t say something, Huo Wujiu really would think that he wasn’t afraid. Tilting his head back, he stared pleadingly at Huo Wujiu as he clung to him.

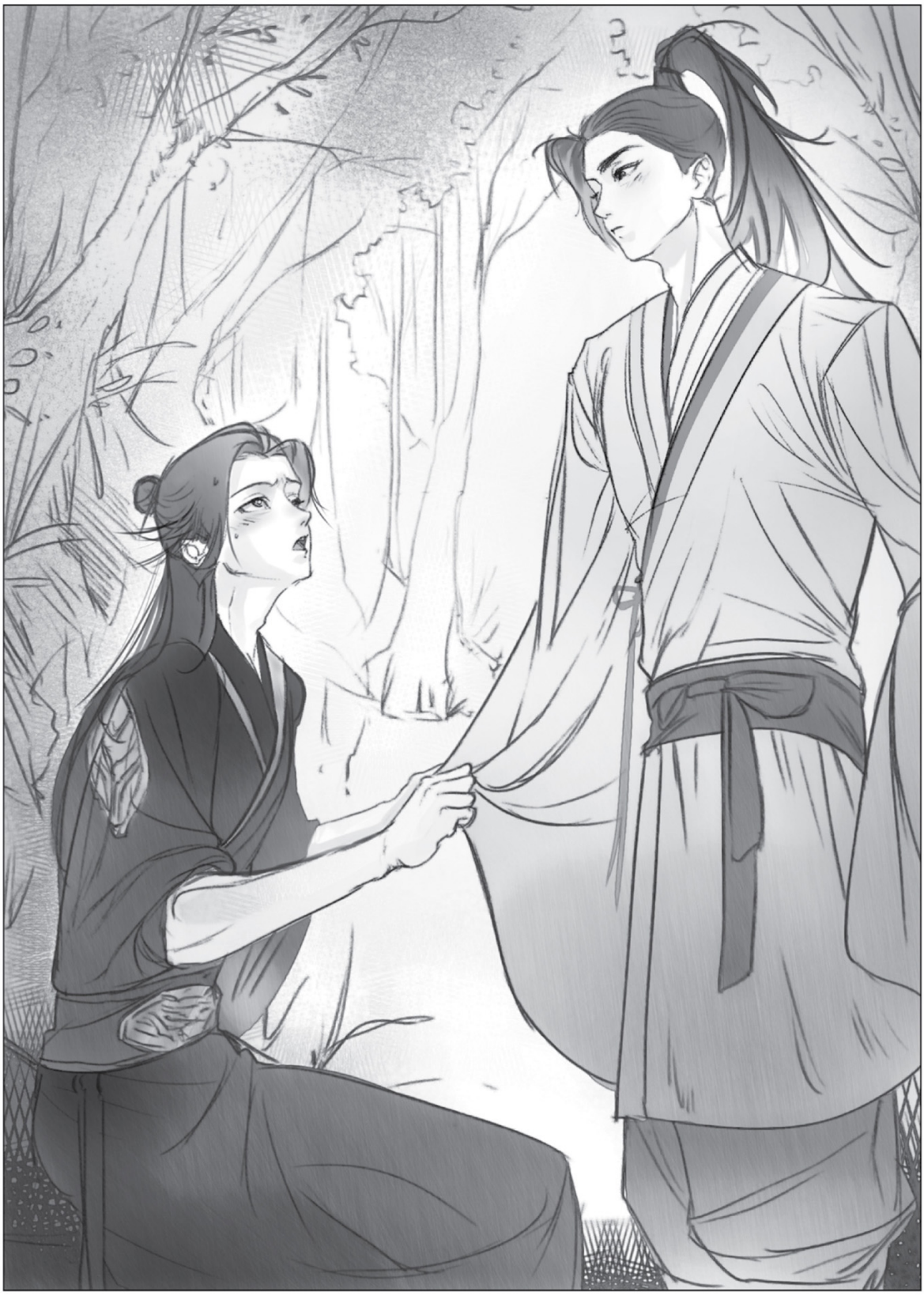
“…I-I mean, you’ve been here all day already,” he mumbled awkwardly. “A little longer won’t change anything, right?”

Huo Wujiu could see his face bright and clear, illuminated by the setting sun. Though his tongue remained rather stubborn, the lingering fear and apprehension in his expression seemed entirely genuine.

The astute and conniving Prince of Jing…actually had no idea he was being teased right now.

Wasn’t he always scheming and pulling strings behind the scenes in the imperial court? He could devise sophisticated strategies and pull off his villainous, haughty prince act perfectly when he took a stand against Pang

Shao. Why was he so gullible when it came to his interactions with Huo Wujiu?



Those guileless eyes alone were enough to soften something in Huo Wujiu's chest, as though the cool evening breeze in the mountains of early summer had swept into the deepest reaches of his heart.

There wasn't much force behind the hand pulling at the bottom of his robe, yet he surrendered to that nonexistent momentum and obediently sat back down.

"Just teasing you," Huo Wujiu relented. His hand seemed to have a mind of its own as it reached out and rubbed the top of Jiang Suizhou's head.

His voice was placating, his touch gentle beyond measure.

Chapter 66

THE CURTAIN OF NIGHT swooped down around them.

Back in Lin'an, servants would light the lamps throughout the Prince of Jing's residence as soon as the sun began to set. When night fell in the mountains, however, it brought everything along with it. As the forest darkened, the grass came alive with a chorus of chirping insects, and countless stars emerged across the heavenly dome above.

Somewhere in the distance, faint hoofbeats could be heard as well.

Or at least, Huo Wujiu heard them—Jiang Suizhou's hearing wasn't as acute. To him, the forest was still tranquil and calm; all he could hear was the murmuring of the stream and the buzzing of the insects in the grass.

He chatted idly with Huo Wujiu for quite a while. Even though they didn't talk about anything important, Jiang Suizhou couldn't help but enjoy it. His mouth curved into a smile that remained on his face the entire time, as if he didn't find this rather monotonous waiting game boring at all.

It's probably because this is something I never dared to imagine before.

Most historians could only dream about one day being able to converse directly with someone from a millennium ago, and yet here he was, sitting right next to the great General Huo, chatting about trifling topics. This man was a hero, immortalized in the history books and well known by all, even in the modern day…and right now, he was currently telling Jiang Suizhou about how his father, the former Marquis Huo, had highly valued his scholarly military strategists. This was a stark contrast to

Huo Wujiu who didn’t even know how to read all the characters and felt sleepy as soon as he cracked open a book.

Jiang Suizhou slowly lifted his gaze.

As a gentle breeze swept past him, the night sky, an expanse of stars, was reflected in his eyes.

How beautiful.

He wanted to turn his head to look at Huo Wujiu but found himself suddenly struck by a sense of trepidation at the mere thought. He’d seen this person so many times by now that the image of him was already imprinted strongly in his mind, and yet he didn’t have the courage to look straight at him right now, as they sat side by side in the shadows.

As though he might accidentally say something he shouldn’t or do something irrational if his gaze lingered a second too long.

And so he stared quietly at the stars instead, listening to the lazy tone of Huo Wujiu’s voice.

A few minutes later, Huo Wujiu slowly stopped talking, letting the conversation die.

Realizing something was amiss, Jiang Suizhou glanced up just in time to see his expression, barely visible in the darkness, gradually grow serious.

“What is it?”

“People are coming,” Huo Wujiu said in a low voice.

He stood up and scanned their surroundings. Once he was sure they were still alone for the time being, he turned back to Jiang Suizhou.

“Just go with the story I told you earlier—they won’t question it.”

Jiang Suizhou responded affirmatively.

Huo Wujiu looked into the distance. Sure enough, tiny pinpricks of light bobbed through the trees, moving vaguely in their direction. Those lights most likely belonged to the imperial guards' search party.

"There's a lot of people with them. They won't do anything to you in such a public setting," he said.

"What are you—?"

"I'll wait for you back at the complex," Huo Wujiu said quietly.

Jiang Suizhou fell silent and just nodded, staring at him nervously.

Huo Wujiu picked up his sword from the ground again and handed it to him. "Put this away. I'm off."

"Right." Jiang Suizhou took the sword from him but didn't do anything else.

He tried so hard to will himself to do something, but his attempts to tear his focus away from Huo Wujiu were unsuccessful. Instead, he continued to stare up at him in a way that made him seem a bit pitiful.

Huo Wujiu's legs suddenly felt a little heavy, despite being accustomed to using skills like qinggong. He paused, then leaned down and cupped a hand on the back of Jiang Suizhou's neck. He gave it a gentle, reassuring knead.

"Don't be afraid," he said softly.

Before Jiang Suizhou could so much as nod in response, he cast another glance into the forest and sprang into action. In a few quick bounds, he melted into the shadows and disappeared in a different direction.

Jiang Suizhou’s eyes remained locked on the spot where he vanished. He stared for a long time before he came to his senses.

Huo Wujiu always took care of things efficiently and meticulously. There wasn’t a single trace of him left in this area; no one would believe that someone else was once here.

If not for the warmth of his palm still lingering on the back of his neck, even Jiang Suizhou might have thought the same.

He didn’t know why he was feeling so despondent inside. It was inexplicable and baffling, especially since they were about to see each other again shortly.

Even so…

He looked up at the dark sky.

There was no moon tonight, just an immense blanket of stars that stretched endlessly above him. Though they seemed to glimmer unusually bright, in the end, they were still just stars. They were the same ones he saw in his original life.

Nothing was going to change, whether a millennium passed or two—they weren’t anything special.

Jiang Suizhou dropped his gaze, suddenly disinterested, and turned his attention to the flickers of light and shouts that were gradually drawing closer to him in the forest.

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Ji Hongcheng would have been the first to admit that he hated the Prince of Jing.

Many years ago, he served under General Lou and often accompanied him on his trips to Yangguan. As a result, he'd formed a deep bond with Marquis Huo, who was a righteous, loyal, and outspoken man. The marquis's only son, Huo Wujiu, was a gifted boy already burgeoning with exceptional military talent.

Additionally, Ji Hongcheng could not deny that he cared deeply about the Huo family.

But, much like General Lou, he found himself on the outside looking in when the Huo family rebelled against the state. Though they were close friends of the Huo clan, their grievances with the imperial court were a personal family matter. As deep as their bond was, both General Lou and Ji Hongcheng were military court officials serving the state of Jing, and nothing was more taboo than disloyalty to the emperor.

So, neither Ji Hongcheng nor General Lou got involved with the Huo family's rebellion, but they both felt rather uncomfortable about their decision.

As the imperial court grew increasingly corrupt and incompetent with the passing of each day, this discomfort became harder to ignore. Pang Shao's rise to power only hastened that downward spiral—it didn't take a political mastermind to understand that. Northern Liang was so powerful it was almost like a force of nature, as unstoppable as the rising sun. Meanwhile, their Southern Jing caved in on itself, weakened and rotting at its core.

Still, Ji Hongcheng could endure all of that.

But then Marquis Huo’s only son was taken prisoner after his defeat in battle.

Instead of just killing or imprisoning him, the emperor married him off to his perverse freak of a brother to be his concubine. How ludicrous and shameful! It made Ji Hongcheng feel like he was sitting on pins and needles.

This was precisely why he disliked the Prince of Jing—particularly that smug look on his face whenever he was humiliating Huo Wujiu. A few months ago, Ji Hongcheng had even brazenly sent letters into the Prince of Jing’s residence. There wasn’t really anything of importance in the letters, since they were mostly filled with him railing against the Prince of Jing.

However, he wouldn’t have gone so far as to say he loathed the Prince of Jing.

Perhaps it was because Huo Wujiu had a chance to deliver a reply to Ji Hongcheng during the palace banquet, which made him realize that his letter truly had made it to Huo Wujiu, thus decreasing some of his animosity toward the prince.

So, he didn’t particularly wish for the prince’s death either.

But after Ji Hongcheng heard about the events leading up to the Prince of Jing’s disappearance, he had to admit that he was not at all confident that he was still alive.

Considering how the Prince of Jing appeared so frail that even a light breeze could bowl him over, he’d be lucky to leave an intact corpse after what had happened. After that frenzied horse bolted into the forest with him, he’d remained there for the rest of the day.

Although Ji Hongcheng was in a somewhat gloomy mood, he'd been given an order, so he was going to have to find the prince, dead or alive. Even if the Prince of Jing had no chance of surviving, Ji Hongcheng still had to bring back his body.

Yet to his surprise, fortune seemed to be smiling upon the Prince of Jing.

Ji Hongcheng and the search party of guards scoured the area from twilight until late in the evening. Eventually, they found the Prince of Jing next to a stream in the forest.

He soon explained how he'd twisted his ankle and had no choice but to sit there and wait for help to arrive, unable to move. Then, he glowered at them and asked what had taken them so long.

Ji Hongcheng was too caught up in his astonishment to reply.

The Prince of Jing…only had a few minor injuries?

Sitting astride his horse, he looked the prince up and down, staring dumbly at him.

Meanwhile, Jiang Suizhou also found himself a bit speechless. He'd been somewhat nervous about the approaching group of people, but he relaxed upon seeing Ji Hongcheng.

While Ji Hongcheng despised Jiang Suizhou, he was certainly no ally to the Pang faction. At the very least, this man wouldn't kill him on the spot and dump his corpse in a ravine.

Clearly, the last emperor and Pang Shao were already convinced of his death.

While Ji Hongcheng was a fairly decent person, he was unfortunately slow on the uptake. He seemed utterly gobsmacked to find the Prince of Jing in one piece, almost as if he were restraining himself from just asking, *“How are you not dead?”*

His rough, leathery face was a grim mask of shock, only strengthening his general resemblance to classic depictions of Zhong Kui.[8]

Jiang Suizhou sighed to himself, narrowly avoiding breaking character entirely. It was hard to keep up the sly, calculating act while this man stared blankly at him in absolute silence.

“Minister Ji,” he warned sharply, “you almost seem disappointed to see I’m still alive.”

Only then did Ji Hongcheng snap out of it. He didn’t confirm or deny that allegation—after all, while he didn’t necessarily want Jiang Suizhou to die, per se, the fact that he wasn’t fond of the prince remained.

“Your Highness jests,” he remarked, then briefly cupped his hands in greeting, arrogance oozing from his demeanor. “By His Majesty’s decree, I humbly invite Your Highness to return to the imperial complex. Guards! Why haven’t you helped His Highness onto a horse yet?”

Jiang Suizhou allowed the nearby imperial guards to help him stand up and climb onto a horse. Finally, they slowly made their way back.

Meanwhile, the temporary imperial residence on the mountainside was the picture of jubilant festivity.

With the tactless Ji Hongcheng dispatched to retrieve the Prince of Jing’s corpse, the emperor remained the winner of today’s hunt. No one made a single mention of Ji Hongcheng, as if he didn’t even exist. The banquet tables were covered in plate after plate of exquisite delicacies, and

wine flowed freely as everyone exchanged toasts celebrating the emperor’s bountiful haul.

Only a select few besides the emperor and Pang Shao were aware of the extra layer of joy underlying this celebration.

The thorn in His Majesty’s side had finally been removed.

The emperor was immensely pleased, and in turn, so was Pang Shao; as a result, they both inevitably enjoyed a few too many drinks. Satiated and inebriated, the last emperor lounged in the embrace of a beautiful woman. A smile spread across his lips as he gazed at the night-shrouded landscape outside the hall with drunken, unfocused eyes.

Since his late father was so fond of that wicked concubine, Jiang Shunheng had freed her soul to keep him company. It was cruel to keep their family separated for so long, but now he’d kindly allowed their most beloved son to join them.

The emperor chuckled tipsily to himself. As he drained another cup, the silhouettes of a group of people gradually materialized in the darkness.

Bit by bit, the merry hall quieted, and everyone looked toward the entrance.

Slowly, carefully, the Prince of Jing limped up the steps with the help of a servant. Ji Hongcheng followed behind him, his off-putting face filled with anticipatory glee for his promised reward.

The prince’s robes were torn and stained with dirt, but despite his disheveled appearance, he seemed to be quite lively.

He stopped in the middle of the hall and bowed to the emperor.

“Please forgive me for my tardiness, Huangxiong,” he said.

Pang Shao's expression flashed from one of joy to horror, and the golden goblet in the emperor's hand landed on the floor with a *clang*.

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Under the pretense of using the restroom, Pang Shao quickly excused himself and left the hall. Before he could do anything else, he needed to get some answers.

His personal attendant stood outside in the shadows, quivering with fear as he waited for him to speak.

"How did this happen?!" Pang Shao demanded, glaring at him with wide, furious eyes. His voice came out in a harsh, strained whisper.

"Master, your servant doesn't know either! The Prince of Jing was indeed headed in the correct direction. To be on the safe side, your servant assigned a few more people to the task—even Tang Gui was dispatched! But…"

"But the Prince of Jing returned, completely unharmed?" Pang Shao gritted his teeth.

"Well…y-yes," the attendant said in a small, trembling voice. "And…none of our men came back…not even Tang Gui."

The silence that followed those words was bone-chilling.

"Not even Tang Gui?" Pang Shao's voice gradually steadied, which only made his fury seem more terrifying.

The attendant didn't dare to reply.

In recent years, his master had needed to eliminate his opposition, and there were certain things that couldn't be done openly. His master had poured years into this endeavor—not to mention an endless stream of silver—before he managed to train these assassins to his satisfaction.

Tang Gui was the most outstanding and capable one of the bunch.

But today, even Tang Gui had failed so completely and utterly…

"Very well." Fury seethed in Pang Shao's voice.

The attendant's head jerked up. Standing in the shadows outside the hall, his master wore an expression stormy enough to summon a downpour at any instant.

"Jiang Suizhou certainly has some talent," Pang Shao said. "Get people out there, right now. I want one group in the forest, searching for clues and bodies. The other group…"

Pang Shao glanced into the hall.

The lights were bright and warm, glimmering against the resplendent decor; it looked like a palace built for the heavens. The Prince of Jing stood inside, his head held high, his slender back straight and proper. Although his clothes were a mess, he carried himself with the bearing of an immortal.

Pang Shao sneered.

"The other group will come with me at once. I'm going to pay a visit to his living quarters while he's occupied here. Mark my words—I'm getting to the bottom of this today."

Chapter 67

JIANG SUIZHOU STOOD WITH perfect posture in front of the last emperor's platform. His face was rather impassive, but he remained calm and unruffled inside, relishing the chaos.

So you want to kill me? My apologies, Your Majesty. It appears you still don't see the executioner's blade suspended above your neck.

Not only can that man save me, he can kill you too.

As those thoughts crossed his mind, Jiang Suizhou stared directly at the last emperor, studying his corpulent form in a rare moment of spite.

Jiang Shunheng was malicious but dull-witted, and he allowed his every emotion to be displayed on his wretched face. Already pale and gnashing his teeth with rage, the emperor seemed to be at a loss for words as he locked eyes with Jiang Suizhou.

As though he hadn't noticed anything, Jiang Suizhou presented just the right amount of confusion and tilted his head as if slightly puzzled.

"Huangxiong?" he prodded innocently.

"Wudi, you're back at last," the emperor said, his jaw still tightly clenched. "You had Huangxiong quite worried there."

The smile Jiang Suizhou offered in response was a tad sheepish, as if he were rather embarrassed, which only riled up the emperor even further.

"Thank you for your concern, Huangxiong," he said. "It can only be blamed on your brother's incompetence—to think I couldn't control a horse."

The look in the emperor’s eyes was more vicious than any Jiang Suizhou had seen before, as if he were itching to run his heart through then and there.

Yet what came out of his mouth was: “So, Wudi, what exactly happened to you today in the forest?”

Jiang Suizhou gave an exaggerated sigh.

“For whatever reason, that horse suddenly went into a frenzy as it approached the trees,” he said. “Tugging on its reins was useless. It simply wouldn’t stop, and it kept running even in the forest.”

The last emperor’s stare was unwavering. “How did it eventually stop, then?”

Pretending he couldn’t see the malice in the emperor’s eyes, Jiang Suizhou gave a little laugh.

“It only stopped when it crashed into a fallen tree and broke its neck,” he said lightly. “But your brother is careless as well as inept, and I twisted my ankle as I fell from the horse. I had to stay where I was and wait for help. How fortunate that Huangxiong sent someone to rescue me just in time!”

At this point in his retelling, he smiled faintly and remarked, as though in casual reflection, “Thus was the danger averted—mercy from the heavens indeed.”

In Jiang Shunheng’s ears, “mercy from the heavens” was mockery of the highest degree.

He’d gotten his hopes up, only for the Prince of Jing to humiliate and disappoint him by refusing to die. Even worse than that was the simmering frustration of getting what he wanted, only for it to slip between his fingers.

And to say the reason was because the heavens pitied this sickly bastard?!

The emperor was so angry that his breathing grew uneven. His chest heaved up and down as he sat on the throne, gripping his goblet with alarming force. It was as if he were barely holding himself back from sweeping everything off the table and onto the floor.

This…was all Pang Shao's fault.

His uncle reassured him, again and again, that the Prince of Jing would be allowed no possible means of escape! He swore that he would take care of everything. He pledged to him with absolute certainty that the Prince of Jing would meet his end in the forest. All Jiang Shunheng had to do was summon the Prince of Jing to his side and give his horse a lash of his whip, and Pang Shao would take care of the rest.

But he didn't. Despite his "failproof" plan, Jiang Suizhou was still very much alive.

The emperor was speechless with rage, to the point his vision flickered with flashes of white. But at last, his fury had found an acceptable target. He scanned the crowd for his uncle.

Pang Shao owed him an explanation for this.

However, when his eyes roamed over to Pang Shao's seat, it was vacant. His servants were also nowhere to be found.

"Where's my uncle?" the last emperor asked with a sullen expression, dark as still water. Jiang Suizhou had completely slipped his mind. "He said he was going to the restroom earlier. Why hasn't he returned yet?"

No one had an answer for him.

The emperor automatically assumed that Pang Shao had fled out of fear of repercussions.

Jiang Shunheng had trusted his uncle deeply since he was young. Until recently, Pang Shao had never done anything to suggest that trust could be misplaced.

But for some time now, his uncle had begun disappointing him with increasing frequency—maybe it was because he was getting on in years, or maybe there was some other underlying reason.

First, Pang Shao had surreptitiously coveted the funds set aside for the ancestral temple, then he'd attempted to frame a seasoned court official to execute him, and most recently his family member had even tried to steal one of the imperial robes.

Jiang Shunheng could excuse these individual acts—the money, the official, the trifling piece of clothing—but he struggled with the realization that his seemingly loyal uncle would deceive and exploit him without a second thought. Pang Shao in fact had two different faces: one in front of him, another behind his back. And they were as different as night and day.

This was a source of great shame, as well as trepidation, and when considered along with the immense blunder he'd made today…

Yes, today—he'd trusted him so much, yet…

For a moment, the hall was utterly silent. No one dared to speak, even as they sneaked glances at their scowling ruler on the dais.

Then, a servant dashed into the room and knelt in front of the emperor.

"Your Majesty!" he said, bowing forward. "This servant is in the service of the Grand Chancellor. The Grand Chancellor had to leave earlier

on account of urgent business. This servant was instructed to inform His Majesty of this matter!”

The emperor glared daggers at the poor boy.

“Urgent business?” he said. “What urgent business could he possibly have?”

“Your Majesty, the Grand Chancellor said there is reason to suspect something is amiss in His Highness the Prince of Jing’s living quarters. He plans to take some people and personally conduct an investigation!”

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A large procession of guards marched up the mountain, torches hoisted high, illuminating the narrow, artfully crafted path.

The column of light spilled noisily into the gardens of the Prince of Jing’s manor, where Meng Qianshan sat in the courtyard, dozing off.

His Highness hadn’t brought anyone with him when he left for the hunting grounds, and he’d also locked Madam Huo in the room for some unknown reason. Only the physician’s apprentice, disguised as a servant, had been allowed to remain with Madam Huo. Since Meng Qianshan didn’t have anything to do or anywhere to go, he had no choice but to sit on the veranda, waiting for His Highness to return.

He remained there the entire day until the sky went dark and drowsiness started to creep up on him.

A commotion startled him into wakefulness.

Meng Qianshan opened his bleary eyes to see a long expanse of light making its way toward the courtyard from the mountain path—perhaps His Highness's escort, he thought. He promptly stood up and hurried forward to greet His Highness, but when the crowd burst through the gates, he was quite surprised to find that the person leading them was the current Grand Chancellor, Pang Shao.

Meng Qianshan quickly stepped forward and bowed in greeting.

"Oh my, it's the Grand Chancellor! This servant goes by Meng Qianshan, His Highness's personal attendant and eunuch. If I may ask, what brings you here so late at—"

Before he could finish speaking, a guard approached and shoved him aside.

These imperial guards were highly trained and aggressive to boot. In the blink of an eye, they sealed off the courtyard and formed an impenetrable wall around it.

"Start searching," Pang Shao ordered curtly.

He'd already given his men clear instructions on the way here.

Pang Shao had a strange feeling about all of this, deep down. Only a team of elite soldiers could completely annihilate every single one of his assassins…or perhaps one person, if they were incredibly skilled in martial arts and other hand-to-hand combat. On the way to Tianping Mountain, he'd had his guards and spies keep an eye on the Prince of Jing's retinue at all times because of Huo Wujiu's presence.

The prince's entourage consisted solely of servants from his residence, and they all came from ordinary backgrounds.

If the Prince of Jing's men weren't among his immediate entourage, then they must have been following the procession from afar. In that case, commands would've had to be exchanged in some manner. As long as that exchange occurred, there would be evidence of it—correspondence, tokens, even devices used to pass along a message. Some trace would exist somewhere.

As soon as he issued the order, the guards stormed into the nearby buildings and began overturning trunks and rummaging through cabinets.

But the people headed for the main building were stopped outside on the covered corridor. Frowning, Pang Shao approached one of the guards who'd just been turned away.

"What happened?"

"Minister Pang, the door to the primary room… It's locked."

Eyes narrowing, Pang Shao strode toward the main building.

Meng Qianshan clambered to his feet and rushed to catch up to him.

"Minister, it's really an unfortunate coincidence, but His Highness locked these doors this morning," he said anxiously, forcing a smile. "He said nobody's allowed to open them until he returns…"

Pang Shao didn't even bother humoring him with a glance. He just lifted his hand and indicated for the guards to take him away.

Light on his feet, Meng Qianshan ducked forward to avoid the guards and then threw himself against the entrance, blocking it with his body.

Despite their quarrel earlier this morning, Madam Huo was still His Highness's dearest and most beloved concubine. And considering that the madam was actually a prisoner of war from Northern Liang, while the man

attempting to reach him was Southern Jing's Grand Chancellor… Well, nothing good could possibly come from that.

Regardless of whether the Grand Chancellor was truly here on official business or simply to stir up trouble, he certainly wouldn't give Madam Huo an easy time of it. Perhaps His Highness could protect him somewhat, but His Highness wasn't here…

So, as his faithful servant, Meng Qianshan knew it was his duty to delay Pang Shao as much as he could.

Pang Shao's brows furrowed tighter once he processed what Meng Qianshan had said.

Jiang Suizhou had locked these doors? That was all the more suspicious.

"And why did your prince lock this room?" Pang Shao asked derisively.

"Perhaps Minister Pang is unaware of this, but His Highness is always extremely vigilant when it comes to Madam Huo!" Meng Qianshan explained quickly. "His Highness was worried that Madam Huo would escape into the mountains, considering how secluded this area is, so he had the madam locked securely away in the room this morning. Excluding His Highness, no one is permitted to open these doors!"

It was a sensible enough reason, but Pang Shao knew he couldn't squander any potential opportunity.

"Guards, pull him aside," he said coldly.

Such unyielding inflexibility was outside of Meng Qianshan's expectations. Out of options, he desperately clung to the door and did his best to kick up a fuss.

“Please spare this servant, Minister Pang!” he wailed pitifully. “His Highness issued an order under penalty of death! If this servant fails to protect this door, His Highness is going to have my head when he comes back!”

Unfortunately, there was little he could do against the sheer number of guards on Pang Shao’s side. Moments later, he was dragged away from the entrance and firmly restrained.

Several guards forcefully rammed the door. After several consecutive *booms*, it burst open.

Everyone flooded into the building, followed by Pang Shao.

It was quiet inside, with candles flickering brightly around the room. Sitting in a wheelchair was a tall, broad-shouldered man, gazing calmly in his direction.

Huo Wujiu.

As soon as Pang Shao’s eyes landed on him, he was struck by an inexplicable gut feeling.

Indeed, the servants accompanying the Prince of Jing were all of humble origin and lacked knowledge of martial arts, but he’d forgotten about this man.

While a few of Pang Shao’s spies were planted within the Prince of Jing’s courtyards, the Prince of Jing was cautious, and Pang Shao had never been able to slip anyone into his main living quarters.

Consequently, ever since the Prince of Jing confined Huo Wujiu at his side, Pang Shao had stopped receiving intel on Huo Wujiu.

That being the case…was it actually possible that these two had formed an alliance? Did Jiang Suizhou keep Huo Wujiu by his side so he could oversee his recuperation in exchange for his protection?

Could it be that Huo Wujiu actually saved Jiang Suizhou today?

While Pang Shao thought that seemed ridiculously unlikely, he had to admit that everything could be explained quite easily if that were the case.

After all, precious few people in this land were a match for his top assassin, Tang Gui. Pang Shao didn't believe for a single second that Jiang Suizhou was capable of cultivating such a talent.

Pang Shao stared at Huo Wujiu intently, as if he were trying to scour him for evidence. Huo Wujiu returned his gaze effortlessly.

"Need something?" he asked impassively.

"Not exactly," he said. "I was just thinking about your injuries, General Huo, and what a shame it is."

A smile gradually took shape on Pang Shao's lips as he spoke.

"If only you could still use those legs to stand, I'm sure you'd be quite the formidable fighter," he said. His tone started out light but quickly grew heavier with implication as he continued. "Why, I wouldn't be surprised if you could even take on ten opponents alone."

He very deliberately and pointedly dragged out the last few words.

Huo Wujiu flicked an unreadable look at him before he lowered his gaze and declined to respond.

That one look, sharp as a needle, was enough to make Pang Shao's skin prickle all over with discomfort, as if he'd been stung.

It was the sting of humiliation, originating from the scornful, contemptuous way he'd been regarded just now.

"Something has been puzzling me today, General, and I'd appreciate your help in clearing up the confusion," he said slowly.

Luckily, he'd come prepared—he had brought an imperial physician along with him. At his words, the physician immediately came forward, awaiting further orders.

Neither of them noticed how Huo Wujiu's face tensed slightly, eyes still downcast, as though he'd heard something.

A moment later, he looked back up at Pang Shao, though his head remained lowered.

One corner of his mouth curled upward as he let out a quiet, derisive huff of laughter.

"You think you're worthy of my help?"

There was no mistaking it—all the guards packed into the room heard those words leave Huo Wujiu's mouth, loud and clear.

At this point, the many turbulent emotions brewing inside Pang Shao tonight abruptly came to a head—the shock of his plan failing, the ire from losing his prized assassin, the fear of losing the emperor's trust, not to mention all of the embarrassment and irritation he felt toward the Prince of Jing…

Everything finally boiled over into pure, unadulterated rage. There was a deafening *boom* in Pang Shao's head, and like a spark landing on a pile of dry firewood…

It caught ablaze.

Pang Shao sneered inwardly.

He'd been forced to exchange false pleasantries with the Prince of Jing, and he always had to humble and lower himself in front of the emperor. Now, he had to put up with this defeated general's belittling attitude too?

He waved away the physician he'd brought with him for this very reason and walked forward alone. Then he lifted his foot and slammed it against Huo Wujiu's wheelchair.

"I'm just curious… Are those legs of yours truly maimed?"

Chapter 68

AT THE END OF THE DAY, Pang Shao wasn’t young anymore.On top of that, he was a scholar-official who never lifted so much as a feather. His physical strength was more than a little lacking.

The wheelchair swayed a little because of his kick, but it didn’t budge otherwise.

The room instantly fell silent, which only made the scoff that came from the man in the wheelchair stand out even more.

Pang Shao looked down. Huo Wujiu didn’t bother raising his head as he swept a languid glance in his direction.

For once Pang Shao’s control slipped, and his eyes widened in anger, all of his fury on vivid display.

The guards didn’t dare to continue watching passively. Rushing forward, they yanked Huo Wujiu up from the wheelchair and threw him to the floor.

There was a heavy, muffled *thump* as he fell, which finally eased Pang Shao’s rage a bit.

They’d all witnessed it—Huo Wujiu couldn’t move his legs at all, let alone exert force with them. When the guards threw him down, he couldn’t fight the momentum; his legs even slammed against the edge of the wheelchair and flipped it over too.

It was clear to all those present that his legs were utterly useless.

Typically, Pang Shao would’ve continued searching the rest of the buildings upon confirming that all was as expected with Huo Wujiu. But the

cavalier tone of Huo Wujiu's voice and the look in his eyes had fully ignited the wrath that Pang Shao had accumulated throughout the night.

His rationality temporarily escaped him.

He gazed down at Huo Wujiu, who'd crashed heavily against the floor. Despite the vindictive pleasure bubbling up inside him, he was dissatisfied with Huo Wujiu's silence.

A worm like him shouldn't have such an iron backbone.

Pang Shao strolled up to him. He raised his foot and then swiftly stomped it down on his leg.

He chose the angle of his strike with intentional and cunning cruelty —it was the exact spot where Huo Wujiu's tendons had been severed. Even though several months had passed since then, the injured area wouldn't have healed that quickly. Immediately, the faint scent of blood seemed to permeate the air.

Restrained by the guards nearby, Wei Kai couldn't stop his hands from helplessly curling into fists. As much as he wanted to break free from their hold, he knew that he couldn't expose his true identity yet, and so he forced himself to watch in silence, his eyes reddening.

Pang Shao was too busy trampling Huo Wujiu's leg to notice Wei Kai.

He stared fixedly at Huo Wujiu on the floor, watching his complexion turn pale and the veins stand out along his neck. Cold sweat began to bead on his forehead.

The flesh under Pang Shao's foot felt dull and lifeless. Even when he stepped on the leg and ground down, he couldn't sense any tension or strength in the muscle.

It seemed Huo Wujiu's legs were indeed completely ruined, but Pang Shao no longer cared about that.

This wasn't about proving a point anymore. He wanted to hear this man scream in pain.

Yet even as his shoulders trembled, Huo Wujiu didn't lift his head an inch, much less make any noise.

This upset Pang Shao.

He put more and more of his weight onto Huo Wujiu's leg, viciously digging into the flesh with his foot.

Still no reaction.

There seemed to be a fire cupped in Pang Shao's chest. The flames kept leaping higher, which only further stifled and aggravated him.

In a fit of rage, he hoisted his leg up and slammed his foot back down on the injured section of Huo Wujiu's leg.

"Official Pang! What exactly are you doing?" the emperor's voice rang out behind him.

Jiang Shunheng had never addressed him in such an estranged manner before; he sounded incredibly displeased.

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Of course, the emperor's displeasure was not because he'd caught Pang Shao humiliating Huo Wujiu.

Rather, it was because all the officials from the banquet were currently standing behind him. Earlier during the banquet, everyone had

heard what Pang Shao was planning to do, thanks to the messenger boy's report. As they exchanged looks with each other, the Prince of Jing panicked—he claimed his name was being sullied, and he was going to confront Pang Shao at once.

A confrontation was one thing, but the Prince of Jing took it one step further by insisting that the entire court accompany him. He said it was so they could all bear witness to whatever it was Pang Shao alleged would "incriminate" him. Naturally, the emperor couldn't say no to his scorched-earth approach; despite his hesitations, he followed Jiang Suizhou with the officials in tow.

And thus, the current scene unfolded in full view of the court.

Perhaps it wouldn't have been so scandalous if Pang Shao were merely rifling through the Prince of Jing's possessions, but they all watched in horror as he stomped on Huo Wujiu's already maimed legs, his face twisted with rage.

Venting his anger so violently—on a disabled man, no less—was not a particularly good look for the Grand Chancellor.

In fact, it was quite shameful.

Under the emperor's contemptuous stare, Pang Shao hastily withdrew his half-extended foot and whirled around to return his nephew's gaze.

"Your Majesty's judgment reigns supreme! Your official merely suspected that Huo Wujiu's legs weren't fully incapacitated, which is why…why…"

"So, did you uncover anything, Minister Pang?"

Before the emperor could speak, Jiang Suizhou abruptly stepped forward from the crowd.

The many eyes in the room immediately turned toward him.

Meanwhile, Jiang Suizhou looked straight at Pang Shao, his expression full of venom.

“Did his legs move at all?” he asked slowly, emphasizing each word.

Pang Shao didn’t seem to have a reply for that—nor did Jiang Suizhou intend to give him a chance to speak.

“Why didn’t you make use of the imperial physician you brought with you for this *investigation*?” Jiang Suizhou demanded. “What’s more, Huangxiong personally oversaw the maiming of those legs, and an imperial physician even conducted an examination afterward to determine that the damage was irreversible.”

His cold, furious voice echoed throughout the quiet room, but he wasn’t done berating Pang Shao yet.

“So why are you here? Are you doubting Huangxiong, because you think him foolish enough to give this waste of space a sliver of hope?” he demanded, his breathing growing more ragged and uneven. “Or are you doubting me, because you think I found a celestial being to heal this cripple, for whatever personal reason?”

Perhaps it was because he was speaking with too much haste, but he erupted into a coughing fit before he could question Pang Shao further.

Meng Qianshan, still restrained by the guards, promptly began struggling against them. Yet the arms holding him in place were like steel, and his efforts were in vain.

His master quelled his coughing. The expression in his eyes was glacial and fierce as he glared at Pang Shao.

“By all means, you’re free to remove this worthless trash from my sight. Kill him if you want, I don’t care—just don’t even think about using him to slander me.”

Pang Shao glanced quickly at the emperor.

He was frowning, impatience and annoyance written clear across his face; he wasn’t looking at Pang Shao.

The emperor was currently incredibly vexed.

He could accept that the Prince of Jing was still alive—at least he could toy with him to amuse himself. In any case, the Prince of Jing didn’t have many years left in him, considering his increasingly poor health. To the emperor, this was but a minor disappointment. Pang Shao’s current actions, on the other hand, were a thorough and utter disgrace.

Making such a scene and allowing all the court officials they interacted with on a frequent basis to witness it made Pang Shao appear volatile and incompetent. Consequently, if the emperor heeded his advice hereafter, he would appear incompetent as well.

To top it all off, the emperor felt that his excitement for the hunting expedition had been greatly spoiled, which only sharpened his irritation.

“Your Majesty…” Pang Shao started.

The emperor shot a tepid glance at him before he turned and left with a whirl of his sleeves.

Pang Shao rushed after him, along with the rest of the officials.

Jiang Suizhou stood out of the way and watched silently as all the high-ranking officials and imperial guards poured out of the buildings and

courtyard. Following Jiang Shunheng, they departed in a rush of noise and commotion.

The courtyard gates closed once more.

Only then did he turn his attention to more important matters.

Huo Wujiu was also watching the crowd disperse. Once they all vanished into the distance, he finally determined it was safe enough to speak. He looked up at Jiang Suizhou, but before he could say anything, he noticed that Jiang Suizhou was already staring at him, head lowered.

Just a moment ago, His Highness the Prince of Jing had sported an icy demeanor and a daggerlike gaze. Seemingly because of his coughing fit, those eyes were now a little red at the edges, glistening with moisture.

Huo Wujiu swallowed anxiously. Just as he was about to tell him he was fine, Jiang Suizhou sucked in a deep breath and turned to Meng Qianshan, who'd thrown himself at his side at the first opportunity.

"Everyone, out. Close the door behind you." He spoke slowly, forcing his voice to remain steady.

Huo Wujiu knew he was doing this because there were too many prying eyes in the courtyard.

Meng Qianshan glanced at Jiang Suizhou worriedly, but he didn't dare to disobey him. He hastily tugged Wei Kai out of the room, though the boy kept peering back every couple of steps.

As soon as the door closed, Jiang Suizhou hurried over to Huo Wujiu and crouched down, gripping his arm.

"Are you all right?" There was a fine quaver in Jiang Suizhou's voice and a watery sheen in his eyes as he examined him closely. "Your legs only

just recovered. Have they been injured again? Can you still stand?”

Huo Wujiu didn’t really know which question to answer first.

“I’m fine. Don’t be afraid.” He paused, then lifted his hand to stroke Jiang Suizhou’s hair.

“But I can smell blood coming from you.”

Hearing this, Huo Wujiu immediately pushed himself to his feet while simultaneously tugging Jiang Suizhou to a stand with him.

“Everything’s okay—the wound on my shoulder split open, that’s all,” he soothed, his voice low and soft. “Everything’s already healed internally, thanks to the medicine Li Changning gave me. The injuries won’t return that easily. My legs are perfectly fine, don’t worry.”

Jiang Suizhou’s eyes snapped to Huo Wujiu’s shoulder.

The fabric there was soaked through with blood, a dark splotch blooming against the robe.

His wound had reopened when he’d been thrown to the ground earlier.

After falling, he’d remained prone on the floor, concealing the injury exceptionally well. Because of Pang Shao’s outburst of rage, everyone’s attention was focused on his legs; no one noticed his shoulder.

However, Huo Wujiu’s shoulder wound was inconsequential to him.

Pang Shao had come prepared—he’d brought an imperial physician along with the guards. Huo Wujiu’s legs were healed by now, so if the physician examined them, the truth would inevitably be exposed. On top of that, he’d heard the sound of people approaching the courtyard from afar. It seemed to be quite the crowd, which was why he’d ultimately chosen to

provoke Pang Shao. By manipulating him to attack in a fit of anger, Huo Wujiu avoided having the imperial physician inspect his injuries.

For him, the cost was merely ripping open a rather small wound—it was a good trade-off.

But Jiang Suizhou clearly didn't agree.

He stood in front of him and brought his hand up. At first, he wanted to touch Huo Wujiu, but his hand stopped partway through the motion, as if he were afraid of hurting him further. He hesitated, unable to close the distance.

There was a stinging sensation in his nose.

He knew that Huo Wujiu was only injured because he'd had to save his life. Likewise, Pang Shao wasn't abusing Huo Wujiu earlier because he was an enemy general—no, it was because Jiang Suizhou hadn't died.

It was all because of him.

This realization made Jiang Suizhou feel particularly, overwhelmingly awful. Huo Wujiu was in good health now. He could've left already, yet he chose to stay and suffer so much misfortune for nothing—just for Jiang Suizhou's sake.

The emotion only continued to build within his chest, tightening it so painfully…that he couldn't bear it.

"It's my fault," he mumbled a moment later.

This time, the choked-up tone of his voice was unmistakable, and it threw Huo Wujiu into an instant panic.

It wasn't anything serious, right? Why was he suddenly so upset?

“It’s not your fault,” he insisted quickly. “Really, I’m fine. The injury isn’t severe or life-threatening. Even if he hadn’t done anything to me, the wound would’ve accidentally reopened in my sleep. There was no harm done.”

Jiang Suizhou raised his head. The tears in his eyes appeared to be on the verge of spilling over.

“None of the imperial physicians here are trustworthy, but someone needs to treat your wound. We can’t stay here any longer,” he said, the tremor in his voice only growing more pronounced by the second.

He paused and took a deep breath, attempting to hold back his sobs and keep his voice more even, but he wasn’t very successful.

“We’re going home tomorrow,” he said.

Huo Wujiu felt as though a string in his heart had been sharply plucked.

An aching sensation swelled in his chest, and his heart hurt terribly for the man in front of him. At the same time, something else pierced sharply through that swollen, tangled mess of emotions—a warm, firm feeling that filled his heart to the brim. It was like something within him was finally settling into place.

Just as Huo Wujiu opened his mouth to speak, Jiang Suizhou blinked, causing a tear to slip from his quivering eyelashes and roll down his cheek beyond his control.

Huo Wujiu couldn’t bear it any longer.

Lifting his uninjured arm, he rested his hand on the back of Jiang Suizhou’s neck and pulled him forward, folding him into a one-armed embrace.

“Okay,” he said softly. “We’ll go home tomorrow.”

Chapter 69

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, Jiang Suizhou reported his illness and requested a premature return to the capital.

The emperor was in a foul mood, likely due to the huge commotion last night, and he wasn't really interested in doing much of anything at the moment. Upon hearing the messenger's report stating that the Prince of Jing had fallen ill, he approved the request with a wave of his hand.

To be fair, Jiang Suizhou was indeed sick.

After he retired to his room last night, he began to plot. There was no question—they had to return to the capital the next day. It was just a matter of finding the right excuse that would allow him to do so.

And the best one came from his own body.

Jiang Suizhou didn't dwell on it any longer, nor did he consult Huo Wujiu. Considering the issue resolved, he furtively opened the window, pushed aside his blanket, and lay there like that for the rest of the night.

It was well past midnight when he finally fell asleep, possibly drained of energy by the cold air.

That said, for a good chunk of the night, he hadn't felt sleepy at all, and so he'd begun mulling over all sorts of different things. He meticulously combed through today's incident with Pang Shao, then turned to contemplating his future plans. Eventually—and inevitably—his train of thought floated over to Huo Wujiu.

He didn't know why, but every time he thought of Huo Wujiu, his ears and cheeks felt a little feverish.

He pressed the back of his hand lightly against his face.

The memory of Huo Wujiu hugging him earlier today flashed through his head.

His own immaturity was to blame—why did he always feel the urge to cry the moment he saw blood? He did his best to hold back the tears, yet they fell anyway. In the midst of his embarrassment, Huo Wujiu simply pulled him into his arms.

Perhaps it wasn't quite technically a "hug," but Jiang Suizhou felt as though he'd been completely enveloped by Huo Wujiu. He could distinctly smell the blood on him, but he could also feel his toned muscles and powerful heartbeat. It thudded against Jiang Suizhou's chest, beat after beat, and spread through his body.

Jiang Suizhou closed his eyes briefly as an odd, inexplicable feeling crept over him. He could only describe it as something akin to discomfort, though it wasn't exactly unpleasant—in fact, it made his own heartbeat pick up in response.

He didn't understand why. He just knew there was something fluttering in his stomach: a mix of anxiety and tension, laced with sweetness.

He'd never experienced this before.

These feelings only made him toss and turn even more. Despite the cold night wind from the mountains sweeping into the room, the warmth in his face never diminished. He finally managed to fall asleep in the wee hours of the morning.

This time, the illness set in overnight. By the time Meng Qianshan shook him awake, he'd already developed a fever.

He opened his eyes in a daze to see Meng Qianshan crouched next to his bed, a worried expression on his face.

He opened his mouth, but a series of hoarse coughs came out instead of words.

Panicking, Meng Qianshan immediately helped him sit up.

“Please forgive me, Your Highness! Your servant must have somehow forgotten to close the window for Your Highness last night, and it caused you to fall ill from the cold! The imperial physician will be here shortly…”

Leaning against the pillows, Jiang Suizhou lazily waved his hand.

“I opened the window,” he stated simply.

There was a wheeze in his voice, stemming from a qi deficiency. He lifted his hand to touch his forehead.

Not bad. His head was currently spinning, his throat was itchy, and his palms and forehead were all burning up—he definitely had a fever.

He couldn’t count on this terrible body of his for much, but at least it never failed to catch a cold in just the right way.

A smile ghosted across Jiang Suizhou’s lips.

When Meng Qianshan heard him casually admit to his actions—with a smile to boot—he was quite alarmed.

“Your Highness…”

Jiang Suizhou interrupted him with a flick of his hand.

“I’m fine; I know what I’m doing. Send a messenger to report to His Majesty that I woke with a high fever, so I need to return to my residence to recuperate.”

As Meng Qianshan swiftly agreed, Jiang Suizhou merely shooed him off.

It was a long trip back to Lin’an. If they tarried any longer, it was going to be midnight by the time they returned. Frankly, he was dreading the idea of sitting in that awful, uncomfortable carriage for hours in his weakened state. Better to get it over with as soon as possible.

“Make haste with it,” he added.

“Yes, Your Highness!” Meng Qianshan darted away.

After sending off Meng Qianshan, Jiang Suizhou braced a hand against the bed and began coughing weakly.

A steaming cup of water appeared before his eyes.

His gaze traveled upward from the cup, and he was greeted by the sight of Huo Wujiu’s stony expression.

The pleased look on Jiang Suizhou’s face froze, tinged with a touch of guilt.

Before he could open his mouth, Huo Wujiu leaned forward and brought the cup up to Jiang Suizhou’s lips. Silently, he began rubbing his back, waiting for him to drink.

How could he dare let Huo Wujiu wait upon him?

However, without the energy to resist, Jiang Suizhou had no choice but to comply.

He gingerly took a few sips of water.

…It was scalding hot.

A couple of tiny sips were about all he could handle before shrinking away from the cup. He didn’t want to drink any more, but Huo Wujiu was

unrelenting. The hand holding the cup didn’t budge.

All Jiang Suizhou could manage to say was a single, timid word: “Hot.”

Due to his sore throat and cough, his voice was particularly soft and a little breathless. As a result, it had an almost coquettish lilt to it that made him come across as rather pampered and delicate.

Pausing, Huo Wujiu pulled the cup back and set it down on a nearby table.

“This is what you meant when you said you had a way to go home early?” he asked in a measured tone.

He sounded calm, but Jiang Suizhou could hear the confrontational, accusatory note in his voice.

“…Yes,” he mumbled guiltily after wavering for a good few seconds.

Then he rushed to explain himself.

“Listen, this is the most straightforward method! We can’t delay treating your wound any longer. And I’m always getting sick, so it’s—it’s really… This isn’t a big deal for—”

Jiang Suizhou couldn’t even make it through his entire sentence before breaking into another spate of coughs that completely incapacitated him.

It was so violent that the world spun around him dizzyingly. His ears were filled with the sound of his own harsh coughing, yet somewhere beneath the noise, he thought he heard a faint sigh.

Afterward, a hand settled on his back like a compromise, offering slow, steady pats.

***

Following this, however, Huo Wujiu didn’t speak again.

He sat silently nearby as a physician performed an examination on Jiang Suizhou. Then he waited quietly for Meng Qianshan’s messenger to return with the imperial decree so they could tidy up their luggage and prepare the carriage for travel.

With the help of a servant, Jiang Suizhou changed into fresh robes and climbed into the carriage next to Huo Wujiu. Throughout the entire process, Huo Wujiu didn’t say a single word.

This left Jiang Suizhou a bit uneasy.

Meng Qianshan brought him a fur blanket and tucked it over him. He curled up on the carriage seat, huddled listlessly in the corner.

The mountain path was uneven, and a horse-drawn carriage wasn’t particularly stable to begin with. He kept swaying and bumping against the walls of the carriage, yet his eyes strayed toward Huo Wujiu again and again.

One terrible worry circled endlessly through his mind: *Is he angry at me?*

His glances were so frequent and poorly concealed that Huo Wujiu inevitably caught him red-handed.

In the throes of illness, Jiang Suizhou jolted in alarm when he unexpectedly found those dark, fathomless eyes staring back at him.

Huo Wujiu’s expression was calm when he finally spoke.

“What is it?”

Jiang Suizhou swallowed hard.

“Please…don’t be mad at me,” he said in a small voice.

Huo Wujiu stilled, almost imperceptibly.

Then he stood up from the wheelchair, walked over to Jiang Suizhou, and sat down next to him.

“I’m not mad,” he said.

“Then why—”

“But next time,” Huo Wujiu cut in, “you should talk to me before making a decision like this.”

Jiang Suizhou choked upon hearing this, briefly at a loss for words. After sputtering awkwardly for a few seconds, he gave up.

“And you said you weren’t mad…” he mumbled under his breath.

Huo Wujiu’s hearing was keen; naturally, he heard him. But all he did was sigh somewhat helplessly before pressing his hand against Jiang Suizhou’s forehead to check his temperature.

“This really wasn’t necessary. We had plenty of other options,” he said firmly.

Jiang Suizhou remained stubborn. “I’ve grown used to being sick…”

That was the truth. Since he came to this dynasty, his life was constantly on the line—he was hardly in a position to worry about something as trivial as a cold. On the contrary, this sickly body of his could sometimes serve as a shield, other times as a weapon. Not only that, exploiting himself came with no psychological or moral burdens. In the event of an emergency, he wasn’t going to hesitate to use himself.

But before he could say anything, Huo Wujiu interrupted him again.

“And are you enjoying yourself?”

Jiang Suizhou sheepishly closed his mouth and fell silent.

“It must be nice being sick, I guess. If not, then why do you still do it? Be honest with me. There are always other solutions.”

Jiang Suizhou knew he was in the wrong. He hadn’t thought it through properly. More than that, he’d become accustomed to making all the decisions on his own, and he never once considered discussing it with Huo Wujiu beforehand.

He ducked his head and let out a muffled “mm” in tacit surrender.

Naturally, he had no idea just how pathetically wronged he looked as he admitted to his mistakes—almost infuriatingly so, in Huo Wujiu’s eyes. He didn’t seem to be doing it on purpose, necessarily, but it was truly incredible how much he looked like a house pet being scolded for its bad behavior. His pouty, aggrieved appearance made it seem as though he’d just been bullied.

Huo Wujiu was extremely weak to this side of him.

By the time he broke the silence, his voice was already as kind as he could make it. But Huo Wujiu was not the sort of man who spoke gently to anyone, normally, and there was something a little awkward and clumsy about his attempt at cultivating a soft, soothing tone.

“It wouldn’t be a problem even if my injury went untreated. The wound isn’t deep, nor was there poison on the blade. The dagger didn’t strike anything vital. It would’ve healed regardless.”

Jiang Suizhou opened his mouth to respond, but Huo Wujiu was merciless.

“Don’t talk back,” he snapped. “I’m much more experienced with this kind of thing than you are.”

Well, that was true.

Despite being a few years younger, Huo Wujiu had grown up amid the chaos of the battlefield. Meanwhile, Jiang Suizhou had never witnessed the tiniest drop of bloodshed in the modern era, and that had made him momentarily lose his nerve before. To top it off, he worried so much about everything that it sent him spiraling into a state of panic.

All right, maybe he really had made a mountain out of a molehill here.

A bit embarrassed, he bit back his words.

Huo Wujiu also went quiet for a while, seemingly organizing his thoughts.

“You were upset when I got hurt yesterday, correct?” he asked some time later.

Jiang Suizhou nodded.

“I could tell,” Huo Wujiu continued. “But did you consider that I might be upset to see you insist on making yourself sick over this trivial injury of mine?”

His words were clumsy and his voice was still a bit awkward, but they genuinely took Jiang Suizhou off guard.

He had no response to that. He just glanced over at Huo Wujiu, who sat perfectly straight and still in the seat next to him. His gaze was lowered,

his expression calm and unreadable. He wasn’t even looking at Jiang Suizhou.

Jiang Suizhou had a tendency to see double when he was ill, and the rocking of the carriage only made his vision worse. As such, he didn’t really register Huo Wujiu’s exceedingly rigid posture, nor did he notice how Huo Wujiu’s seemingly placid eyes were trained unwaveringly on an empty corner.

He was clearly doing his best to hide something, albeit inelegantly.

Another moment passed, and they fell silent as the carriage eventually made it to the foot of the mountain. The road here was unpaved, and between the recent rain and the crush of the emperor’s grand procession, the ground was in exceptionally bad condition.

Finally, Huo Wujiu looked up at Jiang Suizhou.

“Just take care of yourself,” he said. “You don’t need to harm yourself for my sake.”

Jiang Suizhou began to reply, but he found himself interrupted once again—this time by the carriage itself as it suddenly jolted on the uneven road. The force sent him careening toward the wall. He collided against it with a dull thud before immediately slumping and falling back in the opposite direction.

He was convinced his poor addled brain had been shaken into pure mush by now.

Then he landed in someone’s now-familiar embrace.

Warm, solid, with an elasticity distinctive to well-defined muscles—and so stable that all the other noises in the world seemed to fade away, only leaving behind the steady thrum of a pulse.

Jiang Suizhou’s heart seemed to temporarily grind to a halt.

He froze as his flustered feelings from last night came swooping back. It took him a moment to come to his senses. He hastily pushed himself up and tried to stand, only to feel an arm settle heavily around his shoulders and pull him back, anchoring him in his prior position.

The road was still quite rough, but Huo Wujiu’s embrace was firm and gentle. Colliding with him was completely different from smacking into the unyielding carriage walls.

The words died in Jiang Suizhou’s throat. Then Huo Wujiu spoke, and he could feel the vibrations of his voice thrum against his back.

“All right, close your eyes. We’ll be there by the time you wake up.”

Jiang Suizhou wasn’t so sick that he couldn’t move, yet he still stopped struggling.

He sat there, dazed, for another second. Then for some reason, he listened to Huo Wujiu and obediently closed his eyes.

It was a bit unnerving at first, but it was ultimately quite comforting to allow himself to be enveloped in Huo Wujiu’s strong, warm arms as the world around him swayed.

Sort of like a weary bird returning to its nest.

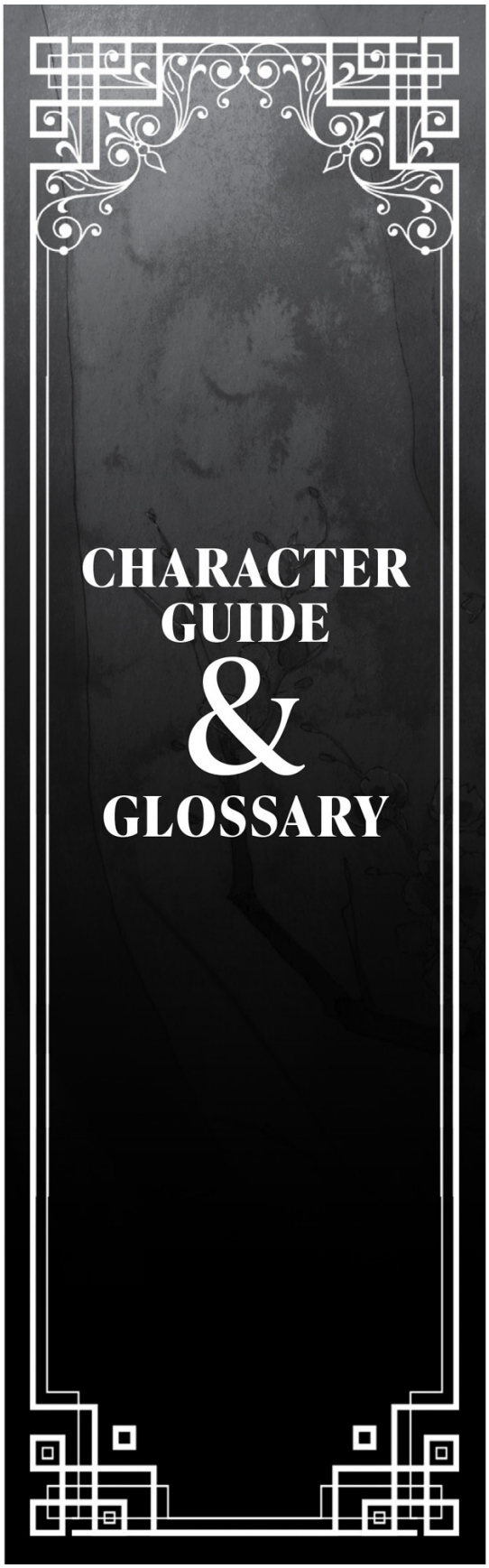
Through the dizzying haze of illness that shrouded his mind, Jiang Suizhou found himself struck by a brief, unexpected moment of clarity.

All of a sudden, he was hit with a reckoning.

He was possibly…probably done for.

Who could’ve imagined that the lie about the Prince of Jing being a cut-sleeve might actually turn out to be true…?

THE STORY CONTINUES IN
After the Disabled God of War
Became My Concubine
VOLUME 3


CHARACTER
GUIDE
&
GLOSSARY

CHARACTERS

MAIN CHARACTERS

JIANG SUIZHOU 江随舟 ("WITH THE BOAT"): The subject of transmigration. Became the unpopular Prince of Jing, who was forced to take Huo Wujiu as his concubine.

HUO WUJIU 霍无咎 ("FAULTLESS"): The Marquis of Dingbei. A captured and maimed general of the Liang dynasty, forced to marry Jiang Suizhou.

PRINCE OF JING'S RESIDENCE

MENG QIANSHAN 孟潜山: Head eunuch of the residence.

GU CHANGYUN 顾长筠: One of the Prince of Jing's concubines.

XU DU 徐渡: Another of the Prince of Jing's concubines.

SUN YUAN 孙远: A young servant in the residence.

JING IMPERIAL COURT

JIANG SHUNHENG 江舜恒: Emperor You of Jing, the last emperor of the Southern Jing dynasty. The Prince of Jing's brother.

PANG SHAO 庞绍: An upper-first rank official and the maternal uncle of Jiang Shunheng.

JI YOU 季攸: The Minister of Rites and the Prince of Jing's superior.

JI HONGCHENG 纪泓承: A military official. Lou Yue is his patron.

LOU YUE 娄钺: A famous general of Southern Jing. Was close friends with Huo Wujiu's father.

CHEN TI 陈悌: A corrupt official from Pang Shao's faction.

QI MIN 齐旻: An elderly high-ranking official. Well respected in court and opposed to Pang Shao.

ZHAO DUNTING 赵敦庭: A court official. Qi Min was his chief examiner during the imperial examinations.

NORTHERN LIANG

LI CHANGNING 李长宁: A traveling physician who infiltrates the Prince of Jing's residence with the intent of healing Huo Wujiu's legs.

WEI KAI 魏楷: One of Huo Wujiu's trusted subordinates. Pretends to be Li Changning's apprentice.

NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

FAMILY

HUANGXIONG: A word meaning "imperial brother." A form of address for older male relatives of a similar age in the imperial family, usually meant for the emperor's elder brothers.

WUDI: A word meaning "fifth younger brother." Literally refers to the order in which the addressee was born in the family.

OTHER

-**GONGGONG:** A respectful form of address for a eunuch.

GLOSSARY

CONCUBINES: In ancient China, it was common practice for a wealthy man to possess concubines in addition to his wife. They were expected to live with him and bear him children. Generally speaking, a greater number of concubines correlated to higher social status, hence a wealthy merchant might have two or three concubines, while an emperor might have dozens or even a hundred.

IMPERIAL EXAMINATIONS: A series of examinations designed to select the brightest of the populace to serve in the court as officials. They were separated into three main stages: entry, provincial, then palace, focusing heavily on Confucian doctrine and literature. Passing the exam was a great honor: The top scorer, or Principal Graduate, of each exam would return home showered in accolades. It was the only method through which someone could become part of the aristocracy.

RANK SYSTEM: For much of Chinese history, officials were divided into ranks which denoted their status within the court, with upper-first rank being the highest. Courtesy demanded that lower-rank officials show appropriate respect to those ranked above them.

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: Traditional medical practices in China are commonly based around the idea that qi, or vital energy, circulates in the body through channels called meridians similarly to how

blood flows through the circulatory system. Acupuncture points, or acupoints, are special nodes, most of which lie along the meridians. Stimulating them by massage, acupuncture, or other methods is believed to affect the flow of qi and can be used for healing or incapacitation.

About the Author

Liu Gou Hua is a signed writer with Jinjiang Literature City. Notable works include *I Became the Brother of a Whump Novel's Heroine* and *After the Disabled God of War Became My Concubine*. Her most popular title has accumulated over 450,000 bookmarks on Jinjiang and has been adapted into a well-received audio drama under the same name. It has been fully published in simplified Chinese print under the name "Lingering Clouds."

Footnotes

Chapter 35

[1] A predecessor to the more modern mahjong. It uses cards instead of tiles.

[2] A hobby that involves fighting male crickets. It dates back to the Tang dynasty. Oftentimes, bets are made.

Chapter 39

[3] Hua Tuo was a legendary physician who lived during the Eastern Han dynasty. Historical texts note that he was reportedly the first person in China to use general anesthesia for surgery. He was also renowned for his skill in acupuncture.

Chapter 42

[4] Referring to a dark magic practice that involves sealing poisonous creatures in a jar and allowing them to kill each other until only the one with the strongest poison remains.

Chapter 54

[5] Baijiu is a colorless distilled alcoholic beverage made from fermented sorghum, rice, or other grains. Its alcohol by volume percentage usually falls between 35% and 60% ABV.

Chapter 55

[6] A high-quality green tea originating in Longjing Village, Hangzhou. The qualifier “pre-Qingming” means that it came from the premium first harvest, which occurs just before the Qingming Festival in early April.

Chapter 57

[7] Qinggong (轻功, literally “lightness technique”) refers to a mobility-based martial arts technique that “lightens” the practitioner’s body to allow for gravity-defying feats.

Chapter 66

[8] Zhong Kui is a figure from Chinese mythology, traditionally regarded as a subduer of ghosts and considered to be a guardian spirit. He is often portrayed as a burly man with a square face, protruding eyes, and a wrathful expression.

THE FAN-FAVORITE
TRANSMIGRATION DANMEI CONTINUES!
Is a Promise
of Protection Enough?
Jiang Suizhou, a history professor transmigrated into the frail and hated Prince of Jing, has been dealt quite the losing hand. His only bastion of hope? The captured, incapacitated Huo Wujiu, his concubine—and the general whose vengeance will end the Jing dynasty.
But Jiang Suizhou's not going down with the ship! He joins hands with Huo Wujiu with a promise—protection now for protection in the future—and seeks out a physician to heal Huo Wujiu's legs. The two men's bond and trust deepen as they step beyond their mutual obligations to trade blows with Minister Pang, the puppeteer pulling the corrupt court's strings.
Stained reputations, hidden motivations, and political assassinations abound as Huo Wujiu and Jiang Suizhou fulfill their promise. But is this protection alone enough to keep them both safe… and is it all they seek from one another?
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